DUP

The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Reproductions for the plebes: the Banfield proposal *by Hilton Kramer,* 1

The Freudian way of knowledge *by Frederick Crews,* 7

Writing essays *by Joseph Epstein,* 26

James Merrill and "Sandover" *by Bruce Bawer,* 35

New poems *by James Aitchison & David Wagoner* translations of Eugenio Montale *by Jonathan Galassi,* 44

Music: The case of Ivo Pogorelich *by Samuel Lipman,* 52; **Theater:** The greatest salesman of them all *by Mimi Kramer,* 58; **Art:** The art inside the book *by Creighton Gilbert,* 65; Spring exhibitions *by Eric Gibson,* 69; **Letter from London:** Greeks invade Bloomsbury *by Herb Greer,* 74

Books: *Zdzislaw Najder* Joseph Conrad: a chronicle *reviewed by Vernon Young,* 82; *Mikhail Bakhtin* Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics *reviewed by René Wellek,* 89; **Letters:** A response to "The MLA centennial follies" *by Helen Vendler, with a reply by Hilton Kramer,* 94

Volume 2, Number 10 *June* 1984

$3.50

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

GREGORY AMENOFF, LOUISA CHASE, JEDD GARET,
ROBERTO JUAREZ, ROBERT S. ZAKANITCH

represented by

ROBERT MILLER, 724 FIFTH AVE, NEW YORK

May exhibition

BRUCE WEBER: PHOTOGRAPHS OF ATHLETES

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Willem de Kooning

New Paintings, Sculpture and Drawings

through June 23

Sculpture

Berlant · Chamberlain · Crozier

de Kooning · Hague · Heizer

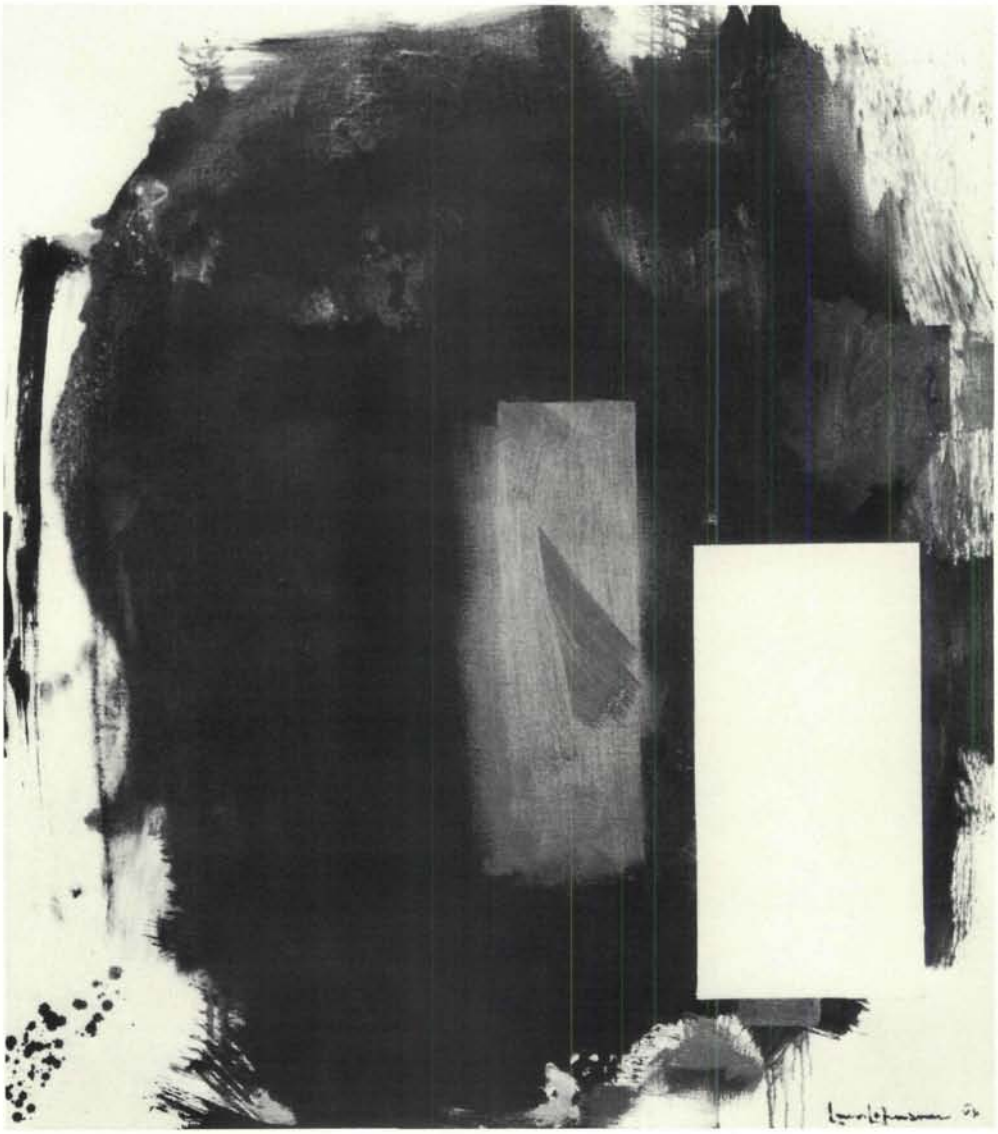
Tony Smith · Westermann

July 10—September 14

XAVIER FOURCADE INC.

36 East 75 Street New York, NY 10021 212 535-3980

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Midnight Stillness, 1964. Oil on canvas, 5′ x 4′4″ (152 x 132 cm.)

The Estate of

HANS HOFMANN

is represented by

ANDRE EMMERICH GALLERY

41 East 57th Street, New York 10022
Telephone (212) 752-0124

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The New Criterion *June 1984*

Editor *Hilton Kramer*

Publisher *Samuel Lipman*

Managing Editor *Erich Eichman*

Assistant Managing Editor *Eva Szent-Miklosy*

Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*

Office Manager *Colleen Babington*

Contributors to this issue

James Aitchison has published two collections of poetry, *Sounds Before Sleep* and *Spheres*. He lives in Stirling, Scotland.

Bruce Bawer's essays and reviews have appeared in *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*.

Frederick Crews is professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. His books include *Out of My System: Psychoanalysis, Ideology, and Critical Method* and *The Random House Handbook*.

Joseph Epstein's new collection of essays, *Plausible Prejudices*, will be published early next year by W. W. Norton.

Jonathan Galassi is the poetry editor of *The Paris Review*. His translations of Montale's poems in this issue are from *Otherwise: Last and First Poems*, to be published by Random House in the fall.

Eric Gibson wrote "The 'Triumph' of Mark Tansey" for the May issue of *The New Criterion*.

Creighton Gilbert teaches art history at Yale University.

Herb Greer is an American playwright living in England.

Mimi Kramer is the regular theater critic for *The New Criterion*.

Samuel Lipman is the music critic for *Commentary*. A new book of his essays, *The House of Music*, will be published in July by David R. Godine.

Eugenio Montale (1896-1981) is recognized as the greatest Italian poet since Leopardi. The poems in this issue are among the very last he wrote.

David Wagoner's thirteenth book of poetry, *First Light*, was published in 1983 by Little, Brown.

René Wellek is Sterling Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature at Yale University.

Vernon Young is the author of *Cinema Borealis: Ingmar Bergman and the Swedish Ethos*.

The New Criterion is published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. Publication Number ISSN 0734-0222. June 1984, Volume 2, Number 10. Subscription rates: $27 for one year, $50 for two. Application to mail at second-class postage rates is pending at New York, NY and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send changes of address to 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019.

Copyright © 1984 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc.

Distributed in England by Periodicals in Particular, 1 Prince of Wales Passage, 117 Hampstead Road, London, NW1. Editorial/business correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt of an issue must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of its date. **Advertising representative:** Catherine Shanley, 521 Fifth Ave., NY 10175. (212) 268-2162; 757-6454.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman and printed by the Eastern Press of New Haven, Connecticut.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bill Noland

Wall Sculpture · May 31 to July 13

Representing Contemporary Artists

Darryl Hughto · Susan Roth
John Adams Griefen · Clifford Ross
Peter Reginato · Kikuo Saito
Dan Christensen · Bill Noland

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc.

22 East 80 Street New York, NY 10021 Telephone (212)879-6606

Summer hours begin June 11 through September 3, Monday-Friday, 10-5:30

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Reproductions for the plebes: the Banfield proposal

by Hilton Kramer

It is one of the curiosities of modern cultural life that a great many people who have neither an interest in art nor any real knowledge of it—people for whom art has never, in the normal course of things, become a significant factor in either their experience or their thought—nonetheless find themselves, for a variety of non-aesthetic reasons, compelled to have a great many opinions about it. In a perfect world (we may suppose) they would live their lives and pursue their specialized tasks, whatever these might be, without feeling obliged to give a moment's thought to the vexing issues that are likely to suggest themselves to anyone who has formed the habit of reflecting upon the complexities of aesthetic experience. But as the modern world tends—in this respect no less than in others—to be a highly imperfect place, more and more of these aesthetic illiterates (as I believe they may accurately be described) are tempted to speak out on a subject that is wholly alien to their customary outlook on life and its established frames of reference.

Why do they do it? For we are not speaking of fools or knaves, but of intelligent, well-intentioned people who are likely to have some sense of the intellectual risks involved when they venture into realms they know nothing about. Often they are professionals in other fields who have devoted much time and labor to the mastery of their own disciplines, and when it comes to the ongoing work in their own disciplines they are not in the habit of looking kindly upon the intrusion of ignorant outsiders who volunteer muddled opinions based on mistaken assumptions. Yet these same professionals nonetheless expect to be taken seriously when they offer up similarly muddled views on the experience of art. What is even more dismaying is that, in some quarters at least, they *are* taken seriously.

Why they do it is not really a mystery, however. They do it because they are asked to do it. Their opinions are anything but unprompted. More often than not, their views are solicited in high places where, owing to the increased visibility that art has now come to enjoy in our cultural life, the need for an "outside opinion" on the ramifications of its social utility is more and more felt to be a prerequisite to the formulation of an enlightened social policy on the arts. In the councils of government, in private foundations, and in the executive offices of the major corporations it is taken for granted, moreover, that an ignorance of art is not in any way to be regarded as an impediment to the formulation of social policy on the arts. What is looked for, after all, is not a key to the aesthetic mysteries but something that is assumed to be more easily obtainable: an intellectual framework that will enable all parties concerned—artists, patrons, the public, and the various bureaucracies that claim to speak for their interests—to reach a correct assessment of the needs to be met and of the consequences of any policy designed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to meet them. Ideally, from this point of view, questions having to do with purely aesthetic matters need not—and should not—enter into the discussion of government policy at all.

In the real world, however, aesthetic questions are not so easily quarantined. Wherever large sums of money are allocated for the arts, whether the money comes from Mobil or the United States Treasury or some private bank account, critical decisions on aesthetic questions are unavoidable, and in fact they are made every day as a matter of course. The same holds true for all attempts to formulate a social policy for the arts. The creation of an intellectual framework to be used as the basis of such a policy may initially be thought to be free of aesthetic prejudice, but this never turns out to be the case. Sooner or later every theory of arts patronage and every analysis of its actual or probable consequences will be found to harbor an aesthetic position. There is no way to avoid it, and attempts to pretend otherwise must therefore be regarded as strategies for avoiding public responsibility in the matter.

It is a particular virtue of Edward C. Banfield's new study, *The Democratic Muse: Visual Arts and the Public Interest*[1]—it may, indeed, be its only virtue—that its author never for a moment pretends that he has not brought a good deal in the way of aesthetic prejudice to bear on his inquiry into government support of the arts. *The Democratic Muse,* the latest in a series of Twentieth Century Fund studies of this subject, purports to examine public funding of the visual arts as it has manifested itself in three specific spheres: the National Endowment for the Arts, the "typical" American art museum, and art-education programs in American public school systems. Toward the activities in all three of these spheres *The Democratic Muse* takes a very dim view.

> None of the arts agencies under study [Banfield writes]—not the NEA, the art museum, or the public school—has a defined purpose in any proper sense of the word, let alone one arrived at with knowledge and deliberation. What passes for purpose with each of them is a set of vague and conflicting statements of good intentions based on gross misperceptions of the nature of art and of the amount and character of the public demand for it—the precipitate, so to speak, of competitive struggles among interest groups and of adaptations by administrators endeavoring to maintain and enhance their organizations in the face of changing circumstances.

It wouldn't much matter, however, if the NEA, the art museums, and the public schools ever did succeed in bringing a greater degree of "knowledge" and "deliberation" to the task of defining their purposes. Banfield, who is George D. Markham Professor of Government at Harvard University and author of *The Unheavenly City,* is categorically opposed to government support of the arts, in any case. "The American regime exists for purposes that are not served by art," he writes, "and the support of art is not among the powers that were given to the federal government."

It is in statements of this kind—and *The Democratic Muse* fairly abounds in declarations of a similar sort—that Banfield registers his categorical opposition to government programs for the arts, and it was no doubt precisely for the purpsoe of articulating its strong and obdurate position on this question—a position, we may suppose, presumed by its sponsors to be politically "conservative"—that the book came to be written (and supported by the Twentieth Century Fund) in the first place. Yet for anyone with a keen interest in the experience of art and its place in contemporary cultural life, the importance of *The Democratic Muse* is not to be found in its many disquisitions on "the powers" that may be seen to have been "given to the federal government" but in its analysis of what Banfield himself, over and over again, insists on describing as "the nature of art."

1 *The Democratic Muse: Visual Arts and the Public Interest* by Edward C. Banfield. A Twentieth Century Fund Essay. Basic Books, Inc., 244 pages, $15.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What makes *The Democratic Muse* a really startling and bizarre book is not in fact what it says about government but what it says about art—for it is really upon the latter that its author comes to base his adversary position on government support.[2]

What, then, does the author of *The Democratic Muse* have to tell us about the nature of art? This, alas, is not a question easily answered. Banfield is rather more certain and more forthcoming about the alleged failure of others to do justice to the nature of art than he is about the nature of art itself. In this respect, the failure of what he calls the "typical" American art museum is claimed to be complete.

> The one standpoint from which the museum is not an astonishing achievement [he writes] is the artistic. If the proper function of an art museum is to collect and display works of art and, beyond that, to make the experience of art more widely and intensely felt, then the art museum has failed. Although it has afforded countless moments of aesthetic enjoyment to countless viewers, it has mainly misrepresented the nature of art, put obstacles in the way of experiencing it, and encouraged the substitution of pecuniary and curiosity values for aesthetic ones. Because it has so long been the principal intermediary between visual art and the public, the art museum must bear much responsibility for widespread confusion about the nature of art.

Now it should be noted that an art institution which is acknowledged to have succeeded in affording "countless moments of aesthetic enjoyment to countless viewers" would not, by the reckoning of most observers, be regarded as having failed to perform the task for which it had been created. But in Banfield's peculiar reckoning, some mysterious gulf is presumed to separate these "moments of aesthetic enjoyment" from a proper understanding of "the nature of art," and aesthetic enjoyment must therefore be discounted in measuring the museum's achievement.

About aesthetic experience itself—not exactly an incidental issue in this discussion—Banfield shifts his position so frequently in this book that it is finally impossible to discern any coherent view of the subject. Yet at each stage in his discussion of aesthetic experience and the bearing it may or may not have on formulating a proper social policy on the arts, Banfield writes as if his own confusions and contradictions are somehow irrelevant to the resolution of the issues he is addressing. About the art museum's alleged "substitution of pecuniary and curiosity values for aesthetic ones," for example, he is highly indignant, and a good many pages of *The Democratic Muse* are devoted to what he regards as professional malpractice in this realm. But would he really prefer a museum policy which met his own standard—which he never troubles to define, of course—for isolating aesthetic values in, so to speak, a germ-free environment? Clearly he would not. He castigates the museum for encouraging (as he sees it) the practice of "art viewing [that] is done more and more for nonaesthetic purposes, especially to learn about art and cultural history"—as if, by the way, there existed some natural opposition between the acquisition of aesthetic experience and a knowledge of art and cultural history. Yet he is equally opposed to the pure aestheticism that he elsewhere seems to uphold as the art museum's only legitimate concern, for aesthetic experience—in yet another shift in the argument—is deemed to be "private" and there-

2 As for what *The Democratic Muse* actually says about "the powers" of government, this is by no means as unequivocal as it might seem. In the very last paragraph of this very strange book, Banfield himself offers an observation that effectively capsizes his entire argument against government support of the arts. "The role of the government in a free society," he writes, "must be a matter of continuous negotiation among members of its public." One can only wonder what sort of book Banfield might have written if this interesting observation had occurred in the first—rather than in the last—paragraph of the book. For nowhere in the main body of the book is this "matter of continuous negotiation" acknowledged to be a legitimate option for a "free society" in determining the "role of the government."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fore to be regarded as either irrelevant to our society or actually destructive of its values:

> . . . insofar as art is responded to aesthetically, the response [he writes] tends more and more to be a private one, having its effects mainly upon the viewer and little upon those he lives among and thus indirectly upon society. Finally, insofar as the experience of art does affect the society, it may sometimes be destructive of the values upon which social well-being depends.

Are we then to assume that "the values upon which social well-being depends" will not "in a free society . . . be a matter of continuous negotiation among members of its public"? Oddly enough, neither the George D. Markham Professor of Government at Harvard University nor his sponsors at the Twentieth Century Fund have judged it important to address this question in a book called *The Democratic Muse.*

The truth is, Banfield stands opposed to whatever policies and practices our museums now pursue, for he is deeply suspicious of art itself. He doesn't like the fact that art costs money. He doesn't like the idea that its social utility may not easily be described or controlled. He is against the doctrine of art-for-art's-sake, if only because "it means that aesthetic values are not to be weighed against other values—moral ones, for example," but he is equally opposed to any attempt to impose "other values" upon our intercourse with art. Above all, he doesn't like the fact that certain works of art are, by their very nature, unique and irreplaceable, and thus come to be regarded as having a special value—an aesthetic value that, precisely because of this uniqueness, inevitably results in it's being assigned a high financial value in the marketplace for art. Indeed, one sometimes has the impression in reading *The Democratic Muse* that the only thing in modern life about which Banfield is even more suspicious than art is the free marketplace itself. It is his grave and abiding suspicion of the art market, in fact, that has prompted Banfield to make his most startling proposal in this book.

For it must be said that Banfield is not one of those writers who merely denounce the practices of others. At least as far as museum policy goes, he has a program of his own to offer. He has thought deeply about that problem of substituting "pecuniary and curiosity values for aesthetic ones"—for Banfield, one of the great cultural crimes being committed by the museums. He has also thought—not so deeply, perhaps—about that other vexing problem, "the nature of art." And in putting his thoughts about these two problems together, he has come up with a solution for both. If we are ever to succeed in separating the pecuniary value of art from its aesthetic value, and thus make it possible for the true nature of art to enter our consciousness in an uncorrupted condition, this can only be accomplished, Banfield believes, by the creation of what he calls "two markets for art: one for art as art and the other for art as a collectible and for investment." In other words, the museums should turn over the original works of art in their possession to the traders in the second of these markets and replace the originals with—*reproductions*!

Lest the reader think that I am misrepresenting Banfield in this discussion, I am obliged to quote from the text:

> In effect, enterprises that put high-quality reproductions on the market serve precisely this publicly advantageous separation of aesthetic from other values. They make separate commodities of what would otherwise be joint ones: art as an aesthetic experience and art as a collectible or investment . . . .
>
> The art world will object, saying that a copy, however good, cannot have the artistic value of the original. It is clearly true that most do not. But is it true that they *cannot*? From a purely aesthetic standpoint, it can make no difference when, where, or how a work was produced: all that matters is its quality as art. A priori there is no reason to believe that a copy—even a poor copy—cannot be an even *better* work of art than a very good original . . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> Perfection, however, is not in all circumstances the appropriate standard. If one is willing to settle for copies that are "excellent" (meaning that no one but an expert can detect a difference with the naked eye), the cost will be less. And if one is willing to have copies that are just "very good" (meaning that an experienced and careful viewer gets almost as much aesthetic satisfaction from them as from an original), the cost will be lower still. A reasonable person must ask in what circumstances the difference between "very good" and "excellent," or between "excellent" and "perfect," is worth the difference in cost.

Of course, the cost—in dollars, anyway—would be lower still if we just chucked art out of our lives altogether, which is pretty much what the Banfield proposal would mean if it were every to be seriously acted upon.

This whole farcical attempt to play the disinterested aesthetic theorist, postulating hypothetical distinctions between "excellent" reproductions and merely "very good" ones, as if the problem of substituting a piece of printed paper for, say, a painting by Rembrandt were merely a question of calling upon the requisite mode of technology for its production, is nothing but a ghastly intellectual fraud. Pretty ghastly, too, is Banfield's apparent inability to distinguish between artists' copies of works of art and deliberate attempts at forgeries, and between both of these, on the one hand, and the machine production of printed reproductions, on the other. In the protracted discussion of art reproductions which so gruesomely disfigures the analysis of government's role in supporting the arts in *The Democratic Muse,* Banfield quite simply reveals himself to lack even the most elementary understanding of what a work of art *is.* He seems to be under the impression that a painting, for example, somehow enjoys an aesthetic existence easily separable from its physical realization—quite as if it were something like a Platonic archetype awaiting the ministrations of the camera and the printing press in order for the painting's pure aesthetic essence to be liberated at last from its despised imprisonment as a commodity.

Banfield just doesn't have a clue as to what the word "work" means when we speak of a *work* of art. Not surprisingly, he invokes the expected and completely bogus analogy with music. If we can enjoy recorded versions of Beethoven symphonies, he asks, why not machine-made reproductions of Rembrandt paintings—conveniently overlooking the fact that it is in the nature of a Beethoven symphony to be *performed* and thus replicated, while it is in the very nature of the Rembrandt painting to be unique. It is tiresome to have to point out that what we see in a reproduction of a painting is something far removed from the artist's *work.* In a reproduction we see only some of what the camera saw in the original and what the printers presiding over the printing process made of what the camera saw. This bears no relation whatever to the process of aesthetic realization that occurs when musicians perform a musical work, and it is sheer demagogy to pretend otherwise.

Perhaps this is the place for me to declare my interest, as they say. Six years ago, when the late Nelson Rockefeller went into the business of producing and marketing reproductions of works of art from his own private collection, I wrote an article in *The New York Times* which severely criticized the entire project. Banfield takes note of this event in *The Democratic Muse,* completely swallowing the publicity generated by the Rockefeller organization about "bring[ing] art to the people," and criticizing me for raising questions about the matter. Defending the Rockefeller reproductions, which he describes (in yet another classification) as "of unusually high quality," Banfield writes that "Kramer could hardly have supposed that Rockefeller, generous and high-minded all his life, had suddenly turned unprincipled." Since this statement, in Banfield's mind at least, settled the question of Rockefeller's motives in launching his reproduction business, he goes on to say: "More likely, what

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

so upset Kramer was that Rockefeller had turned traitor to the art world."

Now the fact is that my view of Nelson Rockefeller's character had nothing to do with what I wrote about his reproduction project, and neither did my alleged "loyalty," if that is the word, to what Banfield calls "the art world." (It is not entirely clear if he means to include artists—those who actually make works of art—in this reference to "the art world.") If I wrote out of loyalty to anything in my criticism of the Rockefeller project, it was out of a loyalty to the experience of art—and a recognition of the frauds, commercial and otherwise, that are perpetrated in its name. The notion of bringing art to the people can mean many things, of course. What it meant in the case of the Rockefeller reproductions was, among much else, that people with eight hundred and fifty dollars to waste could buy a piece of paper with an image based on Picasso's painting, *Girl with Mandolin,* machine-printed on its surface. The whole Rockefeller project was a cynical attempt to exploit the ignorance of the affluent—or those among them, anyway, who, because of the glamour of Rockefeller's name, had come to associate art with wealth and status and knew little or nothing about the difference between a painting and a reproduction. It had precious little to do with bringing art to "the people," as these words are generally understood. In *The Democratic Muse,* Banfield is simply trying to give his proposal for filling the art museums with reproductions a free ride on a dead man's coattails.

Because Banfield's approach to government funding of the arts—its merits, its shortcomings, its proper extent, its ultimate effect on art—is so superficial, dogmatic, and meanspirited, he does not advance the necessary discussion of this problem in any way. So far as art itself is concerned, what the Banfield proposal would actually mean, if we were ever so unfortunate as to see it implemented, is that "the people"—those citizens who do not and cannot acquire great works of art as private possessions but who are nonetheless keenly interested in looking at them in the art museums and are now able to do so—would never again have the opportunity to see the real thing. Original works of art would be withdrawn from public perusal, and the experience of them would once again become a privilege of the rich. Reproductions for the plebes, originals for the rich: this is the policy that Banfield's reflections on the "failure" of the American art museum and on the nature of art itself have brought him to propose. It is a proposal that should be categorically rejected—not only in the name of art, but in the name of democracy. For Banfield's *The Democratic Muse*—which might have been more accurately entitled *The Democratic Medusa*—turns out to be anti-democratic as well as anti-aesthetic.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Freudian way of knowledge

by Frederick Crews

Freud is a man given to absolute and exclusive formulations: this is a psychical need which, in my opinion, leads to excessive generalization.
—Josef Breuer, 1907 (Cranefield, 320)[1]

For many connoisseurs of high-level gossip, irony, and scandal, some of the brightest moments of 1983 were provided by Janet Malcolm's spellbinding articles in *The New Yorker* entitled "Trouble in the Archives." The articles dealt with the uproar surrounding the firing of Jeffrey Masson as Projects Director of the Freud Archives, an important collection that has been largely restricted from scholars' view in the Library of Congress for periods extending as far ahead as the year 2102. As Malcolm related, Masson, a brash, newly accredited lay analyst, had made himself something of a Trojan horse within that citadel. Dr. Kurt Eissler, the venerable guardian of the Archives and Freud idolater *extraordinaire,* had been smitten by the glib and cunning Masson, and on Eissler's advice the late Anna Freud had permitted Masson to inspect documents in her own possession that seemed to contradict received views about the early Freud. Malcolm fashioned an intriguing narrative out of Eissler's paternal doting upon Masson and their subsequent falling out over Masson's unsanctioned broadcasting of his new heterodoxy. And in her second article she trumped her portrait of Masson with an even more unlikely figure, Masson's nemesis, Peter Swales—a high-school dropout, a veteran of the rock music and drug cultures, and a self-made Freud scholar of colossal pretensions whose crude attempts to discredit Freud, as depicted by Malcolm, looked like a *reductio ad absurdum* of Masson's own.

Most readers, including nearly every reviewer of Masson's subsequent book on Freud, took Malcolm's articles to be merely a neutral report, though an exceptionally piquant one. They failed to notice the dimension of pro-Freudian advocacy in those articles—typified, for example, in the following feat of logic: "The critics of psychoanalysis argue that people who have been analyzed are 'brainwashed' into 'believing in' psychoanalysis. But the same could be said of people who have come to a sympathetic understanding of Beethoven's genius through learning to play his piano sonatas" (Malcolm 1983a, I:80). Nor did they observe that Malcolm herself called her work "a cautionary tale" (I:80) and that she drew the moral explicitly. There will always be Adlers and Jungs and Massons, Malcolm advised, whose quirks of temperament leave them vulnerable to a disease she named as "virulent anti-Freudianism" (I:121-22).

The further implication of Malcolm's articles—now developed into a book, *In the*

1 Parenthetical citations refer to the list of works that appears at the end of the article, on page twenty-five. Dates are given only for works by authors represented more than once on that list.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Freud Archives[2]—was that if you want to tear down Freud you will get no farther than those hapless Snopeses of scholarship, Masson and Swales. That at any rate was Malcolm's fervent wish. For all of her writings on psychoanalysis, whether narrative or expository, are works of what is known in Washington as damage control (Malcolm 1981, 1983, 1983a). They anticipate objections or negative developments, grant that the Freudian movement is indeed troubled, and then slam the door on the critics, asserting, with Freud himself, that apostates and the unanalyzed cannot be expected to say anything reasonable about her favorite therapy and theory.

That, in my experience, is a characteristic maneuver of the militantly analyzed when they are grappling with doubts. Virtually any negative insight can be entertained, but at a certain moment the pull of the leash is felt and the provisional skeptic finds him- or herself trotting along at Freud's heels as faithfully as ever. Malcolm's 1981 book, *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession*—so acute in its damning revelations of intellectual and institutional decrepitude and so devotional in its final tone—is a classic of the genre. We will see that such short-circuiting of the critical faculty is not an incidental feature of the Freudian tradition.

Masson's own book, *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory,*[3] while it reads like an attack on Freud, turns out to be no less circumscribed by the Freudian *Weltanschauung* than are Malcolm's works. Masson chides Freud for having abandoned his so-called seduction theory, namely, that all hysterias are caused by repressed memories of molestation in childhood. At times Masson seems to urge that Freud changed his mind consciously to curry favor with the colleagues he had previously alienated; elsewhere the motive appears to have been an unconscious wish to exculpate his friend Wilhelm Fliess in the Emma Eckstein affair (of which more below). But never once does it occur to Masson that there may be more than two candidates for an explanation of "neurosis." Nor was this possibility raised in any of the (mostly hostile) reviews that came to my attention. Masson and his antagonists agreed that Freud must have been either right about neurosis before 1897 or right about neurosis thereafter.

Yet that assumption is not only unnecessary in view of competing theories but dubious on its face. For both of Freud's etiologies posited a gap of many years between infantile causes and adult effects. Freud wished us to believe that mental traumata suffered by a relatively undeveloped organism have no immediately detectable influence on that organism yet are somehow retained within it for toxic release at a stage of fuller development. Freud himself abandoned his 1895 "Project for a Scientific Psychology" (Freud 1954) chiefly because he was unable to conceive of a neurological mechanism to convey that deferred action (Sulloway, 123-31). Nor has any physiological vehicle of repression turned up in the nine subsequent decades. Surely that fact points to a grave vulnerability in Freudian theory. Yet Freud's sway among the opinion makers of our culture, many of whom are veterans of a personal analysis, remains so strong that the whole flap over "seduction" has come and gone with scarcely a murmur of misgiving about the repression etiology of neurosis.

Moreover, all parties to the debate over "seduction" have shared a radically faulty sense of the way Freud reached his scientific judgments. Taking his apologetics at face value, they have assumed that he drew theoretical conclusions directly from clinical observation, deciding after x number of cases that his patients had fallen ill through molestation but after x + n cases that the preponderance of evidence now lay on the other side. The dispute, then, has been over which set of Freud's observations was the accurate one. But this narrow inductivist perspective

2 *In the Freud Archives,* by Janet Malcolm; Knopf, 138 pages, $11.95.

3 *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory,* by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 308 pages, $16.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

overlooks the remoteness of Freud's inferences from any data available to him in the consulting room. For while he may or may not have been able to tell whether his patients had been abused in early childhood, the leap into calling such events (or fantasies) neurosogenic had to be largely a matter of faith. Or rather, it was a matter of which books and papers he happened to have been taking as his guide to an informed view of the topic.

In *Freud, Biologist of the Mind,* Frank Sulloway has shown that when Freud abandoned the seduction etiology he was swayed by the sexological theories of Albert Moll, whose influence he tried to disguise (Sulloway, 310-15), and of Havelock Ellis, whose influence he belatedly acknowledged. In his *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905) Freud credited narratives such as Ellis's with having "led me to make the modification in my aetiological hypotheses" (S.E., 7:190-91n.)—that is, with having persuaded him to throw over the seduction theory. As we will see, that is just the barest glimpse of Freud's actual indebtedness to popular thinkers of his day. For now, my point is that Freud's supporters and detractors alike have been bemused by the "empirical" window dressing of his ideas and have underestimated their actual deductive, speculative, and derivative origins. In other words, they have failed to grasp that "the structure of Freud's published arguments is often the exact reverse of the actual genesis of his ideas" (Sulloway, 421).[4]

4 As one sample of this deductiveness, consider Freud's assertion in "The Aetiology of Hysteria" that traumatic sexual experiences before age eight result in deferred hysteria but that the same experiences after age eight result in direct hysteria (S.E., 3:212). Freud cites a total of eighteen case histories in support of this dictum. Even if that figure were not inflated—and we will see that it was—how could a mere eighteen cases possibly yield such a universal law? The answer is that Freud was reasoning not from his cases but from his friend Wilhelm Fliess's rash speculations about "second dentition" and sexual development (Freud 1954, 159; Sulloway, 195).

We remain, then, largely unacquainted with the founder of psychoanalysis, whose steps of reasoning, as opposed to his brilliant but untrustworthy rhetoric, have been glimpsed only by a handful of scholars. Yet we do not have to wait for the promised publication of the unabridged Freud-Fliess letters in order to discern that Freud studies have entered a volatile period and that there can be no turning back from historically informed understanding. For we have now been granted a tantalizing glimpse of the real Freud of the later 1890s, in the very years when he was conceiving psychoanalysis. That picture is so different from the canonical view that a general adjustment of perspective is inevitable. The present essay is a sketch of this new Freud and an assessment of the eventual effect of such understanding on accepted wisdom about the roots of psychoanalysis and its credibility as a general psychology.

II

I begin with the episode that momentarily clouded Janet Malcolm's horizon and that forms the core of Jeffrey Masson's otherwise unimpressive book: the Emma Eckstein case. That episode, which the original editors of Freud's letters to Fliess tried to suppress but which Max Schur brought to scholarly attention in 1966 (Freud 1954; Schur 1966), reveals a Freud totally at odds with the accepted image of the kindly healer and sage. We will see that the Eckstein case leads to fundamental questions about Freud's therapeutic style, his scientific ethics, his feelings about women, his handling of evidence, and his loyalty to notions that even the most fervent contemporary Freudian would have to consider outlandish.

In 1895 Freud summoned from Berlin his beloved friend and hero Wilhelm Fliess, a Berlin nose and throat specialist and biological visionary whom he had known since 1887, to operate on the nose of Freud's patient Emma Eckstein, probably thanks to Freud's identification of her as a victim of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fliess's favorite syndrome, the "nasal reflex neurosis." This affliction, according to Fliess, manifested itself variously in headaches, in neuralgic pains in the shoulders, arms, and stomach, in cardiac and respiratory irregularity and poor digestion, and in reproductive dysfunctions such as difficult menstruation (Freud 1954, 5; Sulloway, 139-40). As one might suppose from this array of symptoms, Fliess was rarely at a loss to discover that one of his patients had a nasal reflex neurosis.

The underlying causes, too, could be various; but like many physicians of the day, including Freud himself, Fliess was convinced that the abominable practice of masturbation was often to blame for otherwise unexplained complaints. It was good, then, to overrule the patient's protestations of innocence and to talk her out of masturbating; that was presumably Freud's role in the Emma case (Masson, 59, 77-78). But a full nasal reflex neurosis also called for direct intervention against the nose—for the nose as understood by Fliess was in fact a secondary sex organ and was thus presumably a site of referral for unhygienic uses of libido. Fliess's arsenal against the nasal reflex neurosis included three treatments of increasing gravity: applications of cocaine to the nasal membranes, cauterization of the "genital spots" within the nose, and finally, as in the Eckstein operation, removal of the turbinate bone from the nose.

Today, of course, the nasal reflex neurosis cannot be found in any diagnostic manual. In a new book that is unfortunately marred by overstatements, *The Freudian Fallacy,*[5] E. M. Thornton has intriguingly proposed that the key to the syndrome was cocaine, which, when repeatedly applied to the nasal membranes and thence absorbed directly into the bloodstream, can eventually bring about most of the indicated symptoms. We do know for certain that both Freud and Fliess liberally prescribed cocaine for any number of initial complaints (Jones, 78-97, 309; Schur 1972, 69, 81, 83, 84, 95, 99). If Thornton is right, Freud and Fliess involved at least some of their patients in a chain of calamities whereby early applications of cocaine led to aggravated and expanded symptoms which then called for more cocaine, cauterization of the tissue damaged by the cocaine, and eventual surgery.

Emma Eckstein's bone removal appears to have been Fliess's first venture in major surgery. He returned to Berlin soon after the operation, leaving Freud to cope with postoperative complications that passed into the grotesque. For Fliess, as it was eventually revealed, had left half a meter of gauze inside the remains of Emma's nose, and Emma nearly died from the resultant infection. As she continued to hemorrhage in subsequent months, possibly as a result of further cocaine therapy, Freud gradually subdued his mortification over Fliess's malpractice and began *blaming Emma's unconscious* for this seemingly perverse refusal to stop bleeding. "I shall be able to prove to you," he triumphantly wrote Fliess, "that you were right; her hemorrhages were hysterical, brought on by *longing,* probably at the 'sexual period' (out of sheer resistance that *Frauenzimmer* has not yet given me the dates) . . ." (Schur 1966, 80). Or again: "she renewed the hemorrhage as an unfailing means of reawakening my affection" (81).

Even pro-psychoanalytic readers of such passages have been alarmed by Freud's having taken Fliess's side against Eckstein, and Masson justifiably calls Freud's diagnostic efforts here an early sign of his tendency to treat the patient as a liar. Feminists in particular have alleged that Freud's "hysterical" interpretation in this instance typifies his misogynistic bias. Terms like *Frauenzimmer* (roughly, "broad") hardly contradict that charge. Yet these criticisms, grave as they are, do not squarely address the overwhelming question implicit in the whole matter. Did not Freud here display a fundamental and characteristic willfulness as an investigator—a willfulness that would undermine

5 *The Freudian Fallacy: An Alternative View of Freudian Theory,* by E. M. Thornton; Dial Press, 272 pages, $17.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the standing of his "genuine discoveries" made in the immediately following years?

When Freud tells Fliess that he will be able to "prove" that Emma's bleeding is hysterical and is governed by "the sexual period," he is referring not to menstruation per se but to Fliess's now discredited numerological theory, which alleged a complex periodicity in all biological processes based on the numbers twenty-eight and twenty-three, representing respectively the female and male biological cycles.[6] Here we see Freud not only applying the theory to Emma but doing so before having extracted "the dates" from her—dates she is withholding from "resistance," a concept that was later to do yeoman service in putting recalcitrant critics as well as patients in their place.

What the Eckstein case reveals above all is a monomaniacal quality in Freud, a weakness for overhasty generalization combined with a slighting of any factors, especially organic ones, that might lead to a diagnosis other than his own. To be sure, such an attitude superficially resembles the boldness of a genuine scientific pioneer, for all such thinkers leap beyond the data lying before them. Thus it is not necessarily damning that Freud was, in the self-estimation he privately expressed to Fliess, "actually not at all a man of science, not an observer, not an experimenter, not a thinker. I am by temperament nothing but a *conquistador,* an adventurer . . . —with all the inquisitiveness, daring, and tenacity characteristic of such a man" (Schur 1972, 201). But as Freud truly remarked to his fiancée in 1884, "the temperament of an investigator needs *two* fundamental qualities: he must be sanguine in the attempt, *but critical in the work*" (Jones, 80; emphasis added). What if Freud turns out to have been a *conquistador* who tilted at windmills? Did his drive toward self-justification habitually warp his judgment and weaken his scruples, as it assuredly did in the Eckstein affair?

III

Once we have mustered a willingness to question Freud's scientific prudence, there is no shortage of telling material to pass in review. Consider, for example, his recognized yet often neglected cocaine phase, which is thought to have lasted from 1884 to 1887. (We will see that it actually lasted through the time when he was literally dreaming up psychoanalysis.) Freud in the mid-Eighties was not merely a recreational user of the newly synthesized drug in its highest-grade pharmaceutical form and a profligate dispenser of samples to friends, relatives, and patients but also the most bigoted of cocaine evangelists (Jones, 78-97). His papers on the subject advocated virtually limitless cocaine applications for every complaint from indigestion, neurasthenia, weak libido, and hysteria to diabetes and syphilis (Freud 1974, 65-73). And though his panegyrics ceased after worldwide cocaine abuse had become so infamous that Freud himself was being denounced as the bringer of a scourge to humankind (Jones, 94), the little-known truth is that he made no substantial recantation of his disastrous advice. If he was rash and self-deluded in 1884, by 1887, when his last cocaine paper appeared, he was cowardly, evasive, and criminally negligent.

These are strong words. But let us reflect on Freud's persistent urging that cocaine be used to wean morphine addicts from their habit. That advice was based partly on American reports which he uncritically accepted and partly on his own administering of cocaine to his friend and colleague Ernst

6 Fliess derived many a fascinating conclusion from this theory—for example, that the day of a woman's death ought to coincide with the onset of her daughter's monthly period. Freud, right through his founding of psychoanalysis, was an avid devoté of Fliess's formulas for prediction, which, as Martin Gardner has shown, were so mathematically supple that they could generate any positive integer; in other words, Fliess's rules could never fail to "say why" any event had occurred, though by the same token all forecasts based on them would be spurious (Sulloway, 142).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fleischl von Marxow, whose reaction to the drug he was able to witness at close range for the rest of Fleischl's life. The Fleischl case constitutes a macabre sign of Freud's reluctance to entertain criticism or to moderate his claims in the interest of curbing medical malpractice.

Both Freud and Fleischl himself thought for a while that cocaine had cured him of morphine dependency (Freud 1974, 144). Freud thereupon drew up a jaunty paper including an apparent reference to that cure, which had featured, he said, "rapid withdrawal from morphine under cocaine treatment" in a mere twenty days. "No cocaine habituation set in," wrote Freud. "On the contrary, an increasing antipathy to the use of cocaine was unmistakably evident" (Freud 1974, 117). But by June 1885 Fleischl, on top of his unabated morphine addiction, was injecting cocaine in daily doses roughly a hundred times stronger than Freud himself was occasionally taking for mood alteration (Jones, 91), and he was experiencing insomnia, fainting fits and convulsions, and hallucinations of white snakes crawling across his skin. Freud repeatedly sat up all night with him observing in anguish these effects, as he privately acknowledged, of his own intervention. Yet in the face of this horrific refutation of his claims, Freud did nothing to forestall publication of his "Fleischl" paper two months later. "It seems to have met with considerable success," observes Freud's adoring biographer Ernest Jones. "Freud was gratified at *The Lancet* abstracting it" (Jones, 93).

Ernst Fleischl von Marxow clung to life through six more years of indescribable suffering. Yet in his last cocaine paper of 1887, replying to his now clamorous critics, Freud still refused to correct his erroneous earlier report—except to indicate vaguely that some patients "get hold of the drug themselves" and abuse it (Freud 1974, 172). Scoffing at substantial and tragic testimony to the contrary, he added mistakenly that only morphine addicts can become addicted to cocaine. Thus Freud still encouraged his physician readers to believe they could prescribe cocaine as a virtual panacea. And though he now deemed it "advisable" (Freud 1974, 175) to forgo subcutaneous injections, he did not even hint that he himself had previously been the leading advocate of precisely that measure, which he had pronounced "quite harmless" (Freud 1974, 109). Rather than admit an error, Freud for the rest of his life tried to suppress his authorship of the offending paper—a strategy that the ever loyal Jones, who liked to write of Freud's "flawless integrity," tactfully ascribed to "unconscious repression" (Jones, 327, 96). Already by the 1880s, we must conclude, Freud showed a pattern of making extravagant curative claims, brushing aside opposing evidence, covering his tracks, and blithely violating the physician's oath to do no harm.

IV

Freud's approach to cocaine was by no means the only early instance of his penchant for contracting rash enthusiasms. A more important if less spectacular example was his eagerness to believe in Jean-Martin Charcot's "demonstrations" of hypnotic control over hysterical symptoms (Ellenberger 1970, 435-42; Sulloway, 28-49; Thornton, 43-85). Few historians today share that positive judgment, and even in 1886 Freud's colleagues in Vienna raised their eyebrows at his gullibility. By 1893 Freud himself had developed major reservations about Charcot's work (see S.E., 3:22-23). But by then, fortified by the no less specious hypnotic "cures" of hysteria claimed by Hippolyte Bernheim in Nancy, he had committed himself to the debatable ideas that hysteria was an authentic syndrome and that the key to its conquest lay in some variant of Mesmeric treatment. Though Freud deserves credit for having eventually abandoned hypnotism, in a sense he never recovered from his own suggestibility before Charcot—a condition, by the way, that may have been enhanced to some degree by his having braced himself with cocaine in order

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to act at ease with the venerated master in 1885 (Freud 1974, 161-66).

Another important step leading to Freud's invention of psychoanalysis proper was his elevation to paradigmatic status of his former friend and mentor Josef Breuer's long abandoned "Anna O." case of 1881-82. Anna, alias Bertha Pappenheim, had suffered from a variety of disorders, including paralysis of three limbs, severe coughing, and bizarre disturbances of speech, which most psychiatrists of the Vienna school would have taken as signs of brain injury or organic disease. But Breuer had considered Anna a typical hysteric—that is, a woman incapable of mastering her feelings—and Freud disputed that diagnosis only in placing even more emphasis than Breuer did on the contribution of sexual factors.

In Breuer's treatment of Anna, Freud had been smitten by a practice that Anna herself had proposed and had dubbed "the talking cure": inducing the patient to dredge up a memory that presumably lay behind a given symptom, which would then vanish. As Juan Dalma has pointed out, Anna probably got the idea from a popular book about Aristotelian catharsis written by Jacob Bernays, the uncle of Freud's future wife (cited by Ellenberger 1970, 484); but Breuer and Freud himself were eager to believe that in this parlor game "hysteria" had met its match at last. Since Anna's many symptoms were intermittent from the beginning, it was easy for both Breuer and Anna to be impressed for a while by the correlation between therapeutic talk and symptom relief. And Freud remained impressed by it—so he claimed, at any rate. As he later wrote in his *Autobiographical Study* (1925), "The state of things which [Breuer] had discovered seemed to me so fundamental that I could not believe it could fail to be present in any case of hysteria if it had been proved to occur in a single one" (S.E., 20:21).

Breuer himself—a modest and decent man who notably lacked Freud's Napoleonic ambition—had apparently idealized his memories of the Anna case in the thirteen-year interval before Freud cajoled him into writing it up for publication. Under Freud's pressure Breuer misled his medical audience into believing that he had lastingly cured Anna of many symptoms. The resultant collaborative book, *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), established Freud's own psychotherapeutic credentials as a colleague of the celebrated Breuer, though in fact the two men disagreed about most theoretical issues and were scarcely on speaking terms when the book appeared.

To dramatize his superiority to Breuer, whom he had come to despise with a passion that even Jones considered neurotic (Jones, 308), Freud told Jones and others a memorable tale about Breuer's having abruptly dropped Anna's treatment in a panic when he realized she had developed a transference love for him and was undergoing a hysterical pregnancy (Jones, 224-25). The burden of this story was that it would require a Freud, not a mere Breuer, to brave the tempests of transference and found a new therapeutic art upon them. Thanks to dogged research by Henri Ellenberger, however, we now know that Freud's tale was a fabrication (Ellenberger 1970, 480-484; 1972, *passim*). Far from having precipitously fled Anna's presence after making great progress on the case, Breuer had arranged well in advance for her commitment to a sanatarium. His letter of transfer characterized her condition as one of "hysterical insanity." And the surviving sanatarium notes, unearthed by Ellenberger, show that Anna retained the symptoms that Breuer claimed, thirteen years later, to have "cathartically" removed (Ellenberger 1972).

Both Breuer and Freud knew of Anna's whereabouts and that her improvement—for she later became a famous philanthropist and social reformer—had begun only after she left Breuer's care. Indeed, Jones reports that "[a] year after discontinuing the treatment, Breuer confided to Freud that she was quite unhinged and that he wished she would die and so be released from her suffering" (Jones, 225). And Freud himself, according to Jung, told Jung that Anna had not been cured by Breuer (Jones, 225). It

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

seems strange that neither Freud nor Breuer could recall that paramount fact when the time came to draw up *Studies on Hysteria*. Freud's career as a specialist in hysteria, it appears, was launched in an ethically shady atmosphere—and was then retrospectively adorned with a mischievous falsehood about Breuer, the chief benefactor of that career.

V

But did Freud perhaps become a more responsible scientist and physician once he was embarked on psychoanalysis itself? That would be surprising after his deplorable early record, especially since it was Freud the psychoanalyst who propagated the fictitious history of Breuer's dealings with Anna O. It is possible, however, that Freud no longer needed to cut corners once he had made a real breakthrough in knowledge. Did he, in his therapeutic practice and his subsequent system building, display a degree of prudence, open-mindedness, and concern for rival explanations that would justify our trust in his new doctrine?

We can begin addressing this question by looking at a typical case history: the highly regarded Dora case, which the patient broke off after three months in 1900 and which Freud wrote up shortly thereafter but published only in 1905 (S.E., 7:7-122). The document is generally considered important because it is Freud's first sustained effort to show in practice how his theory of neurosis meshed with his theory of dreams. But let us begin by thinking about Dora herself (Ida Bauer), a bright and attractive young woman with a tangled family history who was brought to Freud at age eighteen suffering from fainting fits with convulsions and delirium, catarrh, occasional loss of voice, shortness of breath, and a dragging leg. Here again, as with Anna O., we see a constellation of serious troubles crying out for careful attention to the relevance of an organic syndrome. Indeed, there was every reason to pursue that line of inquiry. Dora had grown up with a tubercular father who had contracted syphilis before her conception; father and daughter manifested virtually identical asthmatic troubles; and Dora herself urged Freud to consider the syphilitic basis of her case (7:75).

Interestingly enough, Freud readily agreed with her. As he explained, every neurosis finds a "somatic compliance" in some underlying condition (7:40), and in his clinical experience a father's syphilis is regularly "a very relevant factor in the aetiology of the neuropathic constitution of children" (7:21n.). This opinion, however, in no way dissuaded him from regarding Dora as yet another weak-willed woman exhibiting "intolerable behaviour" (7:75) and "a *taedium vitae* which was probably not entirely genuine" (7:24). For Freud had pronounced Dora a hysteric as soon as she had recounted her symptoms, and he already believed that in such a case the only hope of cure lay in undoing the patient's unconscious evasions. The organic aspect of Dora's coughing, he reasoned, was only its "lowest stratum," acting "like the grain of sand around which an oyster forms its pearl" (7:83). Why bother with it, then? Apparently Freud did not even take the trouble to put Dora through a routine physical examination. Instead, he subjected her to an extraordinary campaign of mental harassment.

In Janet Malcolm's apt words, "Freud treated Dora as a deadly adversary. He sparred with her, laid traps for her, pushed her into corners, bombarded her with interpretations, gave no quarter, was as unspeakable, in his way, as any of the people in her sinister family circle, went too far, and finally drove her away" (Malcolm 1981, 97). When Freud learned, for example, that Dora believed she had recently suffered an attack of appendicitis, he brushed aside such a shallow view of the matter and peremptorily decided that the appendicitis had really been a hysterical pregnancy expressing her unconscious sexual fantasies (7:103). Her shortness of breath, he decided, was indeed linked to her father's identical condition, but chiefly in the sense that she must have overheard him wheezing in an act of copulation (7:80).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And her coughing, like Emma Eckstein's bleeding, was just another timid female love song (7:39). In Freud's now prurient mind, steamy erotic speculations were of greater diagnostic interest than manifest signs of disease.

Freud's novelistic case history, in which he plays Poe's infallible detective Dupin, is full of vindictive touches at Dora's expense. One of her complaints, evidently justified, was that her philandering father was tacitly encouraging advances made to her by the husband of that same father's mistress—a state of affairs in which the least culpable party would surely have been the bewildered and frightened teenage girl. But Freud set about to prove that Dora's troubles were produced chiefly by her own mind. When he learned, for example, that years earlier she had felt disgust at being sexually assailed by this "still quite young" and "prepossessing" man (7:29n.), he concluded, "In this scene . . . the behaviour of this child of fourteen was already entirely and completely hysterical. I should without question consider a person hysterical in whom an occasion for sexual excitement elicited feelings that were preponderantly or exclusively unpleasurable; and I should do so whether or no [*sic*] the person were capable of producing somatic symptoms" (7:28).

Freud's uppermost motive in the Dora case, it is clear, was to avoid being taken in by the shiftiness for which "hysterics" were notorious in the medical reports of his time. More specifically, his own diagnostic rule, borrowed from Fliess, told him that women with neurotic problems were almost certainly masturbators and that no progress could be expected until a confession on that point had been extracted. Believing, for example, the Fliessian law that recurrent enuresis is caused by masturbation (Sulloway 1979, 174n.), he forced Dora to admit that in childhood she had been a late bedwetter (7:72-76). Her catarrh, too, he informed her, "pointed primarily to masturbation" (7:76), and so did her stomach troubles. "It is well known," he observed, "that gastric pains occur especially often in those who masturbate. According to a personal communication made to me by Wilhelm Fliess, it is precisely gastralgias of this character which can be interrupted by an application of cocaine to the 'gastric spot' discovered by him in the nose, and which can be cured by cauterization of the same spot" (7:78).

Such flashes of outright quackery are easy to identify but also easy to discount as effects of prevalent misinformation. Far more important for an assessment of psychoanalysis as an investigative method are the implicit rules by which Freud achieved closure in his diagnosis. Once embarked on a given path of reasoning, all he required for confirmation was a suggestive detail or two, such as Dora's having dreamed about a jewel case (her genitals) and having brought a small purse to an analytic session and fiddled with it (7:69, 76)—in other words, the genitals once again. And wherever Dora's associations seemed wanting he simply supplied his own. He remarked, for example, that her dragging leg must indicate a worry that her fantasized pregnancy—fantasized only by Freud under Dora's strenuous protest—was a "false step" (7:103).

When Dora reported a dream about a *Bahnhof* (station) and a *Friedhof* (cemetery), moreover, the genitally obsessed Freud thought at once of *Vorhof* (forecourt), "an anatomical term for a particular region of the female genitals" (7:99). Was not this term suspiciously connected to *nymphs* that Dora had seen in a painting the day before? Now "no further doubts could be entertained" (7:99) that Dora had been sneaking peeks at anatomy books—for how else could she have known the sexual meaning of *Vorhof* and of *Nymphen,* an arcane medical name for the labia minora? Yet Freud never states that Dora spoke the word *Nymphen* at all; he himself, having probably seen the famous Secessionist exhibit, is the one who tells us that the painting in question contained nymphs in the background (7:99). As for *Vorhof,* it is confessedly Freud's personal contribution. Does not his ingenuity here border on the delusional? By diligently sift-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing the contents of his own mind and ascribing them to Dora, Freud had indeed placed himself on a trail of sexually disordered thinking.

VI

The Dora case, then—and there was nothing atypical about its technique—cannot dispel the widespread suspicion that Freud's way with "free associations" was altogether too free. That suspicion haunted his entire psychoanalytic career, beginning with Fliess's cutting allegation in 1901 that Freud (as Freud himself summarized the point in a letter to Fliess) "perceives nothing in others but merely projects his own thoughts into them" (Freud 1954, 337). How could Freud defend himself against that charge? Certainly not by citing the rigor of his interpretive method, for that method allowed him, if other signs were supportive, to regard a patient's dissent as confirmatory, to consider irrelevancies as "displacements," and even, if he wished, to claim as "conclusive proof" of reconstructed memories the fact that patients "have no feeling of remembering the scenes" (S.E., 3:204).

To the end of his life Freud maintained that since his first recourse to psychoanalysis he had never persuaded a single patient "to accept things which [I myself] believe but which he ought not to" (S.E., 23:262). He rested this remarkable claim on three considerations (S.E. 23:262-65). In some cases, he reported, he and other analysts could tell when they were on the right track by their patients' emotional turmoil in the face of correct interpretations. Second, Freud pointed to the chances an analyst gets to reassess a hypothesis in the further course of the analysis; any false construction, he argued, would simply drop out of the picture after a while. And third, Freud maintained that the brilliant success of his treatment was itself proof of correct constructions, since the only explanation for his patients' eventual freedom from neurosis was that they must have "worked through" genuinely pathogenic repressed memories.

Of these three arguments, the least imposing ones are those based on patients' signs of turmoil in analysis and on the analyst's opportunities to double-check his hunches. One can readily imagine why a patient of Freud's—Dora, for example—might have shown considerable agitation in the face of proposals that were zany and insulting rather than penetratingly correct. And there can be little probative value in a therapist's waiting to see whether a hypothesis is confirmed by the rest of the analysis, for everything that subsequently occurs can be colored and even shaped by that very hypothesis as it is seized upon by both parties. Thus we are left with the stronger-looking argument from cure. But as the philosopher of science Adolf Grünbaum has demonstrated, that argument too is fatally vulnerable (Grünbaum, 1979, 1982, 1983). For, in the first place, even genuine cures, to say nothing of the palliations Freud often took for cures, could have occurred for reasons other than veridical "Freudian insight"—just as faith healing has been known to "work" without validating the specific content of the healer's beliefs. And more ominously, even at their best Freud's cures do not appear to have been such in any accepted sense of the term.

If Freud had permanently removed a single neurosis, no doubt he would have told us about the case in detail. But the pro-Freudian researchers Seymour Fisher and Roger P. Greenberg have regretfully concluded, in *The Scientific Credibility of Freud's Theories and Therapy,* that nearly all of Freud's substantially described cases were manifest failures (Fisher & Greenberg, 281-85). And often Freud simply misrepresented therapeutic outcomes—as, for example, in reporting the eighteen successfully completed cases that underlay "The Aetiology of Hysteria" (1896). In other papers of the period he never mentioned more than thirteen cases, and shortly after delivering that paper he complained to Fliess, "I get no new cases for treatment, and . . . not one of the old ones is finished yet" (Freud 1954, 162-63). Even two years later he had yet to men-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tion a successful termination; on the contrary, he reported that his cases were still "doing rather badly" (Freud 1954, 245).

In 1906 Freud confided to Jung that "It is not possible to explain anything to a hostile public; accordingly I have kept certain things that might be said concerning the limits of the therapy and its mechanism to myself . . ." (Freud/Jung, 12). Only toward the end of his career, when his undeserved reputation as a healer was secure, did he begin confessing from time to time that he had "never been a therapeutic enthusiast" (S.E., 22:151) and that he had not found a reliable remedy for neurosis at all (see especially S.E., 23:216-253). Yet he did not feel prompted by that momentous admission to withdraw any of the theoretical claims he had rested on his previous untruths about therapeutic triumph. Indeed, he kept right on asserting that triumph whenever he found himself addressing the credulous public (e.g., S.E., 23:179). The total record leads to no other conclusion than that Freud's appeal to successful outcomes was a bluff from the beginning.

Freud, we recall, was pleased to compare the psychoanalytic revolution to those founded by Copernicus and Darwin. But think for a moment of the contrast between Darwin's scientific scruples and Freud's. The theory of evolution was complete in outline by the late 1830s, yet Darwin delayed publication for twenty years while gathering corroborative data that would display the cogency of his theory to any disinterested observer. Freud, however, not only rushed into print with wild claims, misrepresented his therapeutic results, and recast interpretive rules in his favor, he also bent his rhetorical efforts to denying that skeptics were eligible to criticize him. His case histories and theoretical papers consist in large part of self-serving anecdotes, disarming literary parallels, artful fendings-off of objections, promises that the evidence will come later or false assurances that it was given earlier, declarations that his alleged cures and objective observations are proof of his theory, and attributions of his critics' doubts to unconscious resistance and repression. In brief, Freud, while continuing to profess that psychoanalysis was a rigorous natural science, had simply resigned from the wider scientific community and replaced it with a cult of his personal authority.

VII

As that cult developed in the early years of our century, it gradually took shape around what Frank Sulloway has called the psychoanalytic legend. Through Freud's personal sway over his disciples and the specific mechanism of the training analysis, which Hanns Sachs once approvingly likened to the novitiate of the Church (Sulloway, 486), the legend became focused on one event, Freud's *mysterium tremendum,* his self-analysis. That "most heroic" and "Herculean" feat (Jones, 319, 320), begun and climaxed in 1897, supposedly gave Freud the oedipal clue to his own psychoneurosis and, as a handsome bonus, to all others as well. The self-analysis stands functionally in the place of a conventional scientific defense; rather than being offered the evidence itself to examine, we are asked to embrace a set of intuitions that were revealed to the Master in an access of personal transcendence.

Needless to say, this obscure experience raises some questions for the laity. In the first place, if Freud's doctrine of repression is correct, he could probably not have cracked his own case merely through introspection; the myth of the self-analysis credits him with superhuman powers. Second, according to Jones the immediate motive for the self-analysis was a crisis of remorse caused by the death of Freud's father, whom he had hitherto felt obliged by his theory to hold guilty of having molested him and his siblings, all of whom he considered hysterics. Freud emerged from his self-analysis with a happy exoneration of his late father but a not so fortunate attribution of murderous and incestuous wishes to every child who had ever lived—even children who had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

actually been molested. Non-Freudian observers might think this a steep price to pay for clearing the elder Freud of a charge that had been generated by a half-baked and soon abandoned theoretical notion. And third, since the self-analysis apparently proceeded chiefly through Freud's study of his dreams, any arbitrariness in his method of dream interpretation would cast doubt on the "knowledge" thus obtained. If, for example, Freud merely assumed rather than proved that every dream is powered by an infantile wish—and that is just what he did—then his "discovery" of his own infantile fantasy life by means of dream interpretation was circular.

Freud supposedly laid to rest any doubts about his own case in two ways, by calling up infantile memories—for example, of his desire for his mother's naked body on a train when he was two years old—and by asking his mother to corroborate newly unearthed recollections from infancy about a thieving nursemaid who was now to replace Freud's father in his mind as the family seducer. (Though Freud was in the process of deciding that most memories of early seduction were fantasies, he made an exception in his own case.) Yet he admitted that instead of having repressed his first memories of the wicked nanny, he could have learned about her thieving "in later childhood" and then have put her out of mind until 1897 (Freud 1954, 222). So much for that "proof" of the autobiographical tidbits that gave us the Oedipus complex.

As for the train memory, its purport interestingly matched that of an observation Fliess had already confided about his own two-year-old son Robert, whose spontaneous erections he had been avidly monitoring (Freud 1954, 219; Sulloway, 190). The putative experience also dated from an age when the human brain is so undeveloped that long-term retention of any memories is dubious (Thornton, 175, 206). And the same objection applies *a fortiori* to still another of Freud's self-analytic treasures, the recollection of his having felt jealous of a sibling who was born when he was *one* year old and who died just eight months later (Freud 1954, 219). Is not the whole self-analysis what Richard von Krafft-Ebing called Freud's seduction theory, a scientific fairy tale (Freud 1954, 167n.)?

Shaky though the self-analysis was, Freud appears to have leapt directly from it to his generalities about the panhuman condition. It was enough for him, seeking only confirmations as usual, that he now possessed a clue to the appeal of *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* (Freud 1954, 223-24). And so he simply decreed that all children everywhere, at a stage of their lives when sexual enlightenment still lies ahead of them, literally desire to murder one parent and copulate with the other (as best they know how) and that those wishes, permanently enshrined in the repressed unconscious, play a key part in the formation of every psychoneurosis. Would we allow a less ingratiating rhetorician than Freud to sell us such an idea on his personal guarantee that it was true?

VIII

If we go along with the Freudian legend we find ourselves having to place total trust in Freud's genius as it was operating in 1897. The date is arresting: it marks not only Freud's anguish over his "seducing" father but also the height of his friendship with Fliess, the time when he began mentioning to Fliess that "sexual excitation [at age forty-one] is of no more use to a person like me" (Freud 1954, 227), and the most intense phase of what Jones called a "very considerable psychoneurosis" (Jones, 304), featuring extreme contentiousness and suspiciousness, wild mood swings between exhilaration and depression, cardiac arrhythmia, gastrointestinal disturbances, strangely vivid dreams, fainting fits, and episodes of what Jones characterized as "a twilight condition of mind" (Jones, 306). Ordinarily such facts would be of only peripheral interest within a scientist's intellectual biography, but Freud's case is different by virtue of his having supplied *no other* basis for his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

key discovery than a shamanlike revelation.

The truth is that much of Freud's conduct in the later Nineties was extraordinarily eccentric. Having contracted for no apparent reason "a violent antipathy" (Jones, 308) to Breuer, for example, he took elaborate precautions to keep himself away from Breuer's neighborhood, for the very thought of accidentally meeting his old friend and patron disgusted and unnerved him. His travel plans were circumscribed by special anxieties and taboos (Freud 1954, 214, 219, 237, 285, 306; Jones, 13, 181, 305, 307). He brooded constantly about the fated year of his death, passing one danger point only to see another looming (Jones, 310; Sulloway, 166). And he allowed his daily life to be haunted by dubious extensions of Fliess's already dubious numerological system. Thus he attached sinister meaning to telephone and hotel room numbers, always fearing they might contain a figure unpropitious for his destiny. Analytic apologists have tried to pin this dotty behavior on Fliess, but Fliess never intended his calculations to be applied to years, much less to phone numbers (Sulloway, 166).

Of greatest interest for judging Freud's degree of observational and reporting competence are his hallucinations and his "twilight condition of mind." Was Freud, at the time he devised psychoanalysis, always capable of distinguishing between observation and fantasy or between having heard an idea and having originated it himself? Throughout this period and for a while thereafter he appropriated other thinkers' work as his own, expressing apparently sincere rage when challenged; he even charged the sexologist Albert Moll with plagiarism, whereas Freud was the one who probably lifted ideas from Moll (Sulloway, 254, 304, 311, 313+n., 315, 469). And Fliess's loss of confidence in him—for it was Fliess who became disillusioned with Freud's ethics and his science, not the other way around (Sulloway, 223)—dated from an episode, candidly recounted by Freud in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life,* in which Freud suffered one of his several "priority amnesias." In their final meeting Freud proposed to Fliess that human bisexuality was the key to the neuroses, whereupon the startled Fliess reminded him that he, Fliess, had first tried that idea on Freud two and a half years earlier (S.E., 6:143-44). Freud was soon able to confirm Fliess's version of events, but here again his memory had betrayed him on a point of major importance to his Copernican ambitions.

Max Schur takes Freud's heart condition to have been his primary trouble in this period (Schur 1972, 40-62), but in my opinion E. M. Thornton has made a better case for the centrality of Freud's continued or renewed recourse to cocaine. The known effects of that drug uncannily match every one of Freud's symptoms, from his first heightened and then extinguished libido and his various physical afflictions through his psychic bondage to Fliess and his flashes of paranoia—a condition he belatedly admitted, in a 1916 letter to Sándor Ferenczi, to be a typical consequence of prolonged cocaine use (Freud 1974, xix). We can now say with assurance that Freud's "cocaine period" did *not* end in 1887, the very year he met his fellow cocaine enthusiast Fliess. On the contrary, from at least 1892 through the end of the decade he was not only swallowing cocaine for relief of his head and stomach pains but applying it directly to his nasal membranes. Moreover, the emphasis of his published cocaine papers falls heavily on the drug's capacity to enhance work, especially in people who are prone, as he was, to depression (Freud 1974, 60, 61, 107-8). Thus it is plausible to think that Freud's researches and writings at the time he founded psychoanalysis were influenced by the disorienting effects of the drug. And more broadly, cocaine probably had much to do with Freud's whole shift of attention from neurology to the underworld of contorted sexual fantasy (vom Scheidt).

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud tells us that in 1895 he was not only administering cocaine to his patients but also "making frequent use of cocaine . . . to reduce some troublesome nasal swellings" and that he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

feared he had thereby damaged his nose (S.E., 4:11). Both Freud and Fliess, surely not by coincidence, suffered from chronic inflammation and infection of the nose, conditions probably caused by and certainly treated with cocaine (Schur 1972, 83-84). And again, both men took cocaine liberally to combat migraines (Jones, 309; Schur 1972, 99)—a paradoxical nostrum, for cocaine gives initial relief from headache through its vasoconstrictive effect but then redoubles the pain through a "rebound" dilatation, one that would invite the sufferer to reach for still more cocaine. Incidentally, since Freud appeared to his sympathetic friend as yet another nasal neurotic, he gratefully submitted to Fliessian cauterization of his own nose and even, according to Max Schur, to "surgery on the turbinate bone" (Jones, 309; Schur 1972, 81, 82). Bizarre as this information may appear, the cardinal point is a simple one: Freud had by no means done with cocaine at the time he withdrew into the mists of his self-analysis.

To ascribe psychoanalysis entirely to cocaine, however, would be an act of reductionism comparable to Freud's own crude explanatory overreaching. Neither the origins nor the inadequacies of Freud's doctrine can be properly understood on that basis. His psychic troubles in the later Nineties, whether or not they were brought on by cocaine, did get hypostatized in his general theory of neurosis, but the greater part of that theory was demonstrably rooted in other sources—sources that have been coming to light only recently as scholars have challenged the Mosaic legend inscribed by Jones.

IX

Jones would have us believe that Freud at the time of his self-analysis was a tragically isolated man, surrounded by walls of anti-Semitism, prudery, and repression on the part of his medical colleagues. As Ellenberger (1970) and Sulloway have shown, this picture is totally false. Freud's elders treated their combative and bewildering colleague quite indulgently on the whole. They were not appreciably anti-Semitic, nor were they afraid to discuss sexual matters; one of their company was the great Krafft-Ebing, with whose classification of the perversions Freud is sometimes wrongly credited. And the air in medical Vienna just then was full of the sexological theories of Albert Moll and Havelock Ellis, both of whom were far more advanced than Freud in their awareness and acceptance of unorthodox sexual practices. The myth of Freud's self-analysis has functioned chiefly as a means of extracting him from his milieu and crediting him with ideas that were already current.

But above all, that myth has served to set Freud apart from Wilhelm Fliess. It was Fliess, not Freud's self-analysis or his patients, who convinced him that infantile sexuality was prevalent and normal and thus that no seduction theory need be imported if one were to insist on believing in an early sexual grounding for neurosis (Sulloway, 192-93). It was Fliess again who bequeathed to psychoanalysis the idea of erotogenic zones and phases of development, the notion of a primary human bisexuality, the imputation of an unconscious homosexual component to all neurosis, and the conception of a latency period before puberty (Sulloway, 140, 174-89). The whole Freudian scheme of regression to "fixation points" in childhood development is Fliessian in origin, as Freud grudgingly acknowledged in 1913 (S.E., 12:318n.). Freud replaced the seduction theory, in Sulloway's words, with "Fliessian mechanisms of sexual latency, sublimation, reaction formation, and the pathological fixation of infantile, polymorphously perverse, sexual impulses" (Sulloway, 236).

Even Freud's grim proposal that girls at puberty must graduate from clitoral to vaginal sensitivity—a somewhat mystical project that has kept countless women in analysis while awaiting this neurological sign of grace—derived straight from Fliess's picture of normal development as the suppression

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of innate bisexuality. For Fliess and therefore for his disciple Freud, the clitoris, like libido and pleasure in general, was male, just as neurosis and unpleasure were female (Freud 1954, 179; Sulloway, 163, 202+n.; Thornton, 206). To abandon the clitoris, in Freud's and Fliess's view as in that of less "scientific" authorities in other cultures, was therefore tantamount to becoming a real woman.

According to Sulloway, furthermore, what set psychoanalysis proper in motion in 1897 was not Freud's grasp of the Oedipus complex but his decision to adopt a totally Fliessian account of neurosis. Henceforward, he decided, not just the "actual neuroses" but also the "psychoneuroses" would be explained by reference to disturbances in sexual development or functioning as understood by Fliess (Sulloway, 192). Thus Freud could continue to assert, with Fliess, that some mental disorders were caused by masturbation and coitus interruptus, but those relatively straightforward (if absurd) etiologies could now be joined by others that entailed the very nature of humankind as a species harboring a precariously attenuated sexuality.

Up till this juncture Freud's psychiatric colleagues had been only mildly puzzled by his one-track thinking, and even thereafter they saw nothing novel in his invoking of infantile sexuality, repression, sexual dream symbolism, resistance, transference, and sublimation. Those "discoveries" were commonplace notions that derived partly from popular belief, partly from Romantic *Naturphilosophie,* and partly from the discredited pseudoscience of Mesmerism (Whyte; Ellenberger 1970). Though neurologists could see that there was something retrograde about Freud's humorlike "quantities of excitation" that build up within the organism and then seek a psychophysical discharge, no one seemed especially concerned about his reversion to that Greco-Roman medical idiom. No: insofar as psychoanalysis attracted notice at all in its early years, the persistently raised objection was to just one point, the *exclusively* sexual etiology of all neurosis. That was what put psychoanalysis on the map as a dogma to be reckoned with—and it was Fliess's idea.

Sulloway has shown, moreover, that Freud built his sexual etiologies on a foundation of erroneous genetic theory whose weakness undermines them far more drastically than even opponents of psychoanalysis usually realize. Everyone knows that Freud was a stubborn Lamarckian who never swerved from the idea that acquired characteristics are heritable. Students of his life, failing to notice his consistent record of premature generalization, have wondered why he would not back down on such a dispensable point. But Sulloway shows that the point was not dispensable at all. Freud needed Lamarckism because his relentlessly universal etiology of neurosis would never stand without it (Sulloway, 384-92). If a given case ever failed to yield the required sexual trauma, Freud was prepared to roll out his ultimate weapon, phylogenesis. The patient in such a case would be suffering from guilt produced by ancestral memory traces, perhaps even dating all the way back to the primal crime. Indeed, Freud's fully articulated psychology posited that "all the things that are told to us to-day in analysis as phantasy—the seduction of children, the inflaming of sexual excitement by observing parental intercourse, the threat of castration (or rather castration itself)—were once real occurrences in the primaeval times of the human family, and . . . children in their fantasies are simply filling in the gap in individual truth with prehistoric truth" (S.E., 16:371).

So, too, in the third edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1911) Freud simultaneously extended his claims regarding the sexual basis of dreams and added to his interpretive arsenal a lexicon of universal, phylogenetically given sexual symbols (Sulloway, 350). It would be naïve to imagine that Freud empirically "discovered" these new rules—which were in any case lifted from popular dream books of an earlier time (Ellenberger 1970, 492-93; Sulloway, 323-27)—and that he then found through exercising them that nearly all dreams requiring

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

interpretation are sexually based. Rather, the *ex post facto* leap into phylogenetic explanation gave an appearance of justifying a long planned but tactically deferred extension of theoretical claims.

The other genetic doctrine Freud relied on—Haeckel's "biogenetic law" that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny—has fared somewhat better over the years than Lamarckism, but not in the sense that Freud understood it. For Freud and many of his contemporaries, Haeckelian biogenetics applied not just to embryos but to the early years of life outside the womb. In this misguided extension of Darwinian thought, the human child supposedly recapitulated preceding evolutionary stages in their *adult* forms (Sulloway, 498). And since Freud shared the general late-nineteenth-century belief that *homo sapiens* had evolved upward from a primary sexuality that was being supplanted by "civilization," he therefore had to find adult manifestations of phylogenetically determined sexuality in childhood. Thus "Freud claimed that no one, looking at a nursing infant, could possibly dispute the sexual nature of oral gratification in infancy—a claim that indeed can be disputed if one does not equate infantile forms of pleasure, as he did on biogenetic grounds, with animallike sex" (Sulloway, 498). The voluptuousness that Freud ascribed not just to the infant's mouth but also to its anus was still another by-product of twisted evolutionism on his part. Freud apparently drew this inference not from babies he had observed but from the "invagination" of early multicellular organisms, which indeed combined the reproductive, alimentary, and cloacal functions within a single fold (Sulloway, 261-63).

In the same light we can understand why Freud was especially attracted to Fliess's universal latency period preceding adolescence. Of course there was no sense in which this could be considered a plausible inference from Freud's psychoanalytic interviews with adults. He believed in latency not just because Fliess already believed in it but because the idea introduced a certain tidiness into his vision of humankind as subject to two distinct sets of forces, one phylogenetic, the other experiential. The Freudian-Fliessian latency period formed a barrier between the realm of evolutionary recapitulation (ages minus nine months to plus five years) and that of sexual object choice (puberty and after). The very precariousness of "latency" constituted its appeal to Freud, for an organism that had to suppress a sexuality already rampant at birth would be ideally prone to neurosis—as Freud took our species to be (Sulloway, 378-79).

By today, however, it has become apparent that there is no such thing as a latency period. We now know that sex hormones, surely the chief physiological correlate of whatever Freud meant by sexuality, are secreted in negligible quantities before puberty and that they show no falling off after early childhood (Thornton, 208). But generations of deluded analysts, child care experts, and parents, unaware that they were subscribing to an arbitrary deductive construct rather than to an observed phenomenon, have allowed themselves to be saddled with Freud's lurid anxious-Victorian conception of the human infant as a tinder box of sexual potentialities.

X

The adjustment we must now make in our sense of Freud's intellectual style is dizzying in its implications, yet it should help us put his whole career into a coherent perspective at last. Previously we have thought of Freud as a clinical investigator and therapist who, though he speculated hobbyistically about a variety of extraclinical matters, drew the constructs of his theory from the startling and often distasteful findings he had stumbled across in his practice. But the consulting room was never a laboratory for Freud; it was only the arena in which he applied his prior deductions to specific cases, reassuring himself that his patients had repressed the kind of material he demanded from them. That is why he was undaunted by his con-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tinual therapeutic failures; his mind was on higher things. As he wrote to Fliess in 1896, "When I was young, the only thing I longed for was philosophical knowledge, and now that I am going over from medicine to psychology I am in the process of attaining it. I have become a therapist against my will . . ." (Freud 1954, 162).

Philosophical knowledge: that remained Freud's goal, and he gave himself over to it with increasing indulgence as his circumstances became more secure. But unfortunately for his ultimate stature, his "philosophy" has turned out to be a tissue of retrograde secondhand notions and logically muddy inventions, combined with reckless leaps of gnostic intuition into the secrets of the mind, of history, and even of prehistory. It was the real Freud, not a Freud on holiday from his life's work, who solved with little effort such riddles as the race of Moses (an Egyptian), the reason for Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy ("little Tommy's" repressed infantile rivalries), the basis of social bonds (homosexuality), the cause of war (an innate death instinct), the source of female irrationality (penis envy and a biologically inevitable masochism), the ultimate source of guilt (the primal brothers had second thoughts after killing and eating the primal father), the earliest impulse toward wearing clothes (primitive women wove their pubic hair to hide their phallic deficit), and the subtlest puzzle of all, the origin of control over fire.

In prehistoric times, Freud divined, men went about dousing fires with urine, thus experiencing a homosexual gratification in vanquishing the phallic flames. (Women, with their second-rate fire extinguishers, were presumably *hors de combat* and thus destined for the hearth). According to Freud, our first great benefactor was the man who could sufficiently master his homosexuality to save and nurture a fire instead of obeying his drive to pee on it (S.E., 22:185-93). Such was the anthropological wisdom of the discoverer of the Oedipus complex, itself allegedly a relic of that same fabulous epoch, the fall into culture and libidinal deprivation.

XI

Freud's legacy, it is clear, consists chiefly of pseudoscience that cannot be defended on any grounds. I predict, however, that many psychoanalysts, far from contesting this judgment, will take it in stride. By now they regard Freud as a liability to their own modern enterprise, and they would not be sorry to be disembarrassed of him altogether. For they think of themselves as having turned clinical interpretation and theoretical construction to much better account than he did "as [their] clinical findings," in Janet Malcolm's hearty words, "grow more precise and refined" (Malcolm 1981, 153).

Unfortunately, however, real as opposed to self-assumed progress in psychiatry depends upon means for testing hypotheses and weighing them against one another. This is just what cannot be accomplished for Freudian concepts in the "clinical" patient-therapist relationship. For, as Adolf Grünbaum has demonstrated, the inherent contamination of "clinical evidence" by a therapist's presuppositions is so inevitable, and the whimsicality of causal inferences drawn from free associations is so extreme, that no "clinically" derived theoretical conclusions can be considered dependable (Grünbaum 1979, 1982). And both Grünbaum and Morris Eagle have further shown that neo- and post-Freudian schools, while disputing this or that vulnerable postulate of orthodox Freudianism, invariably rest their own claims on the same epistemological quicksand that Freud did (Grünbaum 1983, 22-23; 1983a; Eagle).

Not surprisingly, then, no psychoanalytic or splinter school has produced cogent clinical support for any of its major developmental or therapeutic tenets, and psychoanalysis as a movement, as Malcolm herself has tellingly shown, is becoming ever more schismatic and ridden with self-doubt (Malcolm 1981). As for the handful of experimental corroborations of Freudian doctrine, they have invariably been naïvely designed, with the result that they have neglected to compare psychoanalytic explanations of a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

given phenomenon with rival ones (Eysenck & Wilson). And similarly, claims for the special efficacy of Freudian therapy have fallen quite flat, for outcome studies have consistently failed to credit psychoanalysis with better results than any number of briefer psychotherapies (Crews, 26-27), all of which, for that matter, show little or no advantage over placebo treatments (Prioleau et al.). Even Malcolm admits that "'proof' of the efficacy of psychoanalytic cure has yet to be established . . ." (Malcolm 1981, 23). It is little wonder that people who are well informed about tangible advances in psychiatry tend increasingly not to quarrel with the Freudian tradition but simply to ignore it as unfruitful.

But why, then, finally, does psychoanalysis still flourish in pockets of our culture, most notably in the discourse of academic humanists and "soft" social scientists? A full answer would be complex—embracing, for example, such factors as deflected religious yearnings, envy of mainstream science, a vogue for "hermeneutic" evasion of empirical tests, the indoctrinating effect of the therapy, the lure of deep certainties and ready-made interpretations, and the persistence of the spirit of unmasking that informs the works of Marx, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Freud himself. In particular, Freud's "Fliessian" side, the one represented in his notions of innate bisexuality and polymorphous perversity, has proved irresistible to ideologues who crave a theory that will show the arbitrariness of bourgeois characterological norms. And on a more mundane level it is a tribute to Freud's sheer gifts as a writer that he continues to charm so many otherwise skeptical people into granting him his Faustian dream.

People who fall under that spell, as I myself once did, find it hard to forsake their poetical science and return to the enigmatic, uncathartic world we actually inhabit. The analyzed in particular, as Malcolm has both remarked and exemplified, "are like members of a religious sect—people bound together by a mysterious experience yielding esoteric knowledge that no one outside the sect is privy to" (Malcolm 1983, 105). Arguments like the present one may well fail to move such an audience.

Yet I suspect that the fate of psychoanalysis will be sealed neither by acolytes nor by apostates but by a fresh generation lacking any cultural or personal stake in Freud's world view. When the Freud whom students first encounter is the one who accused Emma Eckstein of bleeding for love, who hounded Dora with monomaniacal accusations, who lied about his cures, and who enshrined crackpot doctrines in the heart of his explanatory system—and when, further, even intellectuals have grown wary of a therapy whose claims remain wholly unsubstantiated—psychoanalytic dogma will no longer seem esoteric but merely archaic. And when that judgment has become general, perhaps our successors will be able to understand more fully how, in the topsy-turvy moral atmosphere of our century, we came to befuddle ourselves with the extraordinary and consequential delusion of Freudian thought.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Works cited

Cranefield, Paul F. (1958). "Josef Breuer's Evaluation of His Contribution to Psychoanalysis." *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis,* 39:319-22.

Crews, Frederick (1980). "Analysis Terminable." *Commentary,* July, pp. 25-34. Reply to Letters, October, pp. 18-21.

Eagle, Morris N. (1983). "The Epistemological Status of Recent Developments in Psychoanalytic Theory." In *Physics, Philosophy, and Psychoanalysis: Essays in Honor of A. Grünbaum,* ed. Robert S. Cohen et al. Hingham, Mass.: D. Reidel. Pp. 31-55.

Ellenberger, Henri F. (1970). *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry.* New York: Basic Books.

_____ (1972). "The Story of 'Anna O': A Critical Review with New Data." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences,* 8:267-79.

Eysenck, Hans J., and Wilson, Glenn D. (1973). *The Experimental Study of Freudian Theories.* London: Methuen.

Fisher, Seymour, and Greenberg, Roger P. (1977). *The Scientific Credibility of Freud's Theories and Therapy.* New York: Basic Books.

Freud, Sigmund (S.E.). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.* 24 vols. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974.

_____ (1954). *The Origins of Psychoanalysis: Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, Drafts and Notes: 1887-1902,* ed. Marie Bonaparte, Anna Freud, and Ernst Kris. New York: Basic Books.

_____ (1974). *Cocaine Papers,* ed. Robert Byck. New York: Stonehill.

_____, and Jung, C. G. (1974). *The Freud/Jung Letters: The Correspondence between Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung,* ed. William McGuire. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press.

Grünbaum, Adolf (1979). "Epistemological Liabilities of the Clinical Appraisal of Psychoanalytic Theory." *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought,* 2:451-526.

_____ (1982). "Can Psychoanalytic Theory Be Cogently Tested 'On the Couch'?" *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought,* 5:155-255, 311-436.

_____ (1983). "Freud's Theory: The Perspective of a Philosopher of Science." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, 57:5-31.*

_____ (1983a). "Is Object-Relations Theory Better Founded Than Orthodox Psychoanalysis? A Reply to Jane Flax." *Journal of Philosophy,* 80:46-51.

Jones, Ernest (1953). *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud.* Vol. 1: *The Formative Years and the Great Discoveries: 1856-1900.* New York: Basic Books.

Malcolm, Janet (1981). *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession.* New York: Knopf.

_____ (1983). *"Six Roses ou Cirrhose?" The New Yorker,* 24 Jan., pp. 96-106.

_____ (1983a). "Trouble in the Archives." *The New Yorker,* 5 Dec., pp. 59-152; 12 Dec., pp. 60-119.

Masson, Jeffrey Moussaieff (1984). *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Prioleau, Leslie, Murdock, Martha, and Brody, Nathan (1983). "An Analysis of Psychotherapy Versus Placebo Studies." With Open Peer Commentary. *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences,* 6:275-310.

Schur, Max (1966). "Some Additional 'Day Residues' of the Specimen Dream of Psychoanalysis." In Rudolf M. Loewenstein et al., *Psychoanalysis, A General Psychology: Essays in Honor of Heinz Hartmann.* New York: International Universities Press. Pp. 45-85.

_____ (1972). *Freud: Living and Dying.* New York: International Universities Press.

Sulloway, Frank J. (1979). *Freud, Biologist of the Mind: Beyond the Psychoanalytic Legend.* New York: Basic Books.

Thornton, E. M. (1984). *The Freudian Fallacy: An Alternative View of Freudian Theory.* New York: Dial Press.

vom Scheidt, Jürgen (1973). "Sigmund Freud und das Kokain." *Psyche,* 27:385-430.

Whyte, Lancelot Law. *The Unconscious Before Freud.* New York: Basic Books.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Writing essays
by Joseph Epstein

Some years ago, at a large publishing firm, I worked with a Harvard-trained geologist in his early forties who had left an academic post at the University of New Mexico to go into educational publishing. On a rainy afternoon over drinks he told me why. He had published widely and reasonably well, he said, but when he turned forty he came to the conclusion that, as a scientist, he was not first-rate. By "first-rate" he meant a giant in his field. Science, in his view, really was only a place for giants, and to be a second-line scientist, which in his own opinion he was, was to be condemned to spend one's life doing trivial work. An extremely earnest man, he went into educational publishing, where he thought he could do more good.

At the time that he told me this I was myself, along with working as an editor at this same publishing firm, chiefly a book reviewer, which, on most reckonings, would have made me a third- or fourth-line figure. But I recall not being in the least depressed by what he said. I recall, in fact, thinking that one of the advantages of literature over science is that in literature one can do second- or third- or even fourth-line work and it still can matter. One remarks upon an unappreciated writer here, lets the air out of an inflated reputation there, combats a literary tendency one finds pernicious, or calls to the fore an essential but neglected tradition—none of this, it seemed to me then, and it seems to me now, is trivial work. Done well it is important in and of itself; gathered together, it can add up to something of significance. Matthew Arnold, who did precisely this kind of work, once wrote in an essay on Sainte-Beuve, another worker in the same field: "excellent work in a lower kind counts in the long run above work that is short of excellence in a higher; first-rate criticism has a permanent value greater than that of any but first-rate works of poetry and art."

The essay, I suppose, must be counted as "work in a lower kind." There has never been an Age of the Essay, but, in the modern era, there seem always to have been extraordinary essayists. Drawing on English-speaking writers alone, permit me to read the honor roll: Francis Bacon, Sir Thomas Browne, Daniel Defoe; Addison, Steele, Swift; Oliver Goldsmith, Samuel Johnson, Sydney Smith; Lamb, Hazlitt, Cobbett; Carlyle, Arnold, Emerson; Beerbohm, Chesterton, Virginia Woolf; Mencken, Orwell, Edmund Wilson. This is not to mention—as I shall now do—some of the men and women who dropped in from other genres and fields of intellectual endeavor to work out on the essay: Fielding and Goldsmith, Hume and Mill, Thackeray and George Eliot, Bagehot and Macaulay, Mark Twain and Henry Adams, the brothers James and William Dean Howells, Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw, E. M. Forster and John Maynard Keynes. Both lists could be easily extended, but I believe I have supplied the names of enough serious players to provide a pretty fair choose-up game.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Of all literary forms, the essay has perhaps changed least over the course of its life. Can this be because the form of the essay is itself so Protean—because essays themselves have so little form? The formlessness of this very old form is part of its pleasure. A critic, comparing Bacon to Montaigne, who is the father of the essay and the Shakespeare of the genre, remarked that Bacon "never attained the freedom and ease, the seeming formlessness held in by an invisible chain" that is part of the pleasure of reading Montaigne and often distinguishes the essayist at his best. Samuel Johnson wrote rather sniffily of the essay as "an irregular, undigested piece." Aldous Huxley, with Montaigne in mind, once referred to the method of the essay as "free association artistically controlled"—the artistic control clearly being crucial. Rudely inserting myself into this august company, I recall being delighted when a reviewer of a volume of my essays once remarked that they reminded him of a comment that Kandinsky once made about his own method: "I take a line out for a walk."

That same reviewer then went on to lose all the ground he had gained by picturing me as the stereotypical writer of essays—in a phrase, the cliché essayist. We all know that figure: there he stands in plaster of paris, gentle chap, highly cultivated, a lover of nature, a man obviously in touch with the eternal verities. Sheathed in corduroy or tweed, suede patches at his elbows, he puffs reflectively on his pipe. A bit otherworldly perhaps, oblivious to the rush of contemporary events around him, shaped like a Bartlett pear, more full of Shakespeare and Emerson than *Bartlett's Book of Familiar Quotations,* he is, our cliché essayist, a bookish man to his *papier-mâché* fingertips. In recent incarnations, he might have written under the rubric of "The Easy Chair" or "The Peripatetic Reviewer" or "The Revolving Bookstand." Pipe-sucking, patch-wearing, proud to harken back to the leisurely culture of an older day, that's the good old cliché essayist, altogether out-of-it and not minding in the least.

It is a cliché—to use a cliché—that will not wash. Certainly, it fits none of the great figures of the form. Consider some among them: Charles Lamb, with his stutter and his dreary clerkship at East India House and his mad sister at home; William Hazlitt, with his passion and his sad marriage and his need to grind out a living through endless scribbling; H. L. Mencken, with his energy and his love of lambasting a phoney and his joy in life despite his unshakable scepticism about finding the answers to any of its large questions; George Orwell, with his rough-cut cigarettes and his working-class get-up and his ideological battles; Edmund Wilson, with his loneliness during hot summers in his Talcottville stone house and his reading through insomniacal nights and living out his days like the character in "The Cask of Amontillado" imprisoned not by bricks but by books. No, not much evidence of the cliché essayist here.

If there is no standard type for the essayist, neither is there anything resembling a standard essay: no set style, no set length, no set subject matter. The essay is a pair of baggy pants into which nearly anyone and anything can fit. In the college catalogue of this term's offerings, it does not fall under "creative writing"; it is not, strictly speaking, even imaginative, though there has never been a want of imagination among its best practitioners. In range of interest, it is multivarious: there are literary essays, political essays, philosophical essays, and historical essays; there are formal essays and familiar essays. The essay is in large part defined by the general temperament of the essayist. The essayist is—or should be—ruminative. He isn't monomaniacal. He is without pedantry; he is not, as they say in university English departments, "in the profession." The essayist might be found almost anywhere, but the last place one is likely to find him is in the pages of the PMLA.

Along with the essay, there are entities known as the article and the "piece"; let us also not forget journalism and criticism. Are these nomenclatural distinctions merely? Perhaps. No hard rules in this domain,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

where everyone is his own Adam, free to name the creatures about him as he thinks best. For myself, I hold the essay to be a piece of writing that is anywhere from three to fifty pages long, that can be read twice, that provides some of the pleasures of style, and that leaves the impression of a strong or at least interesting character. By this measure F. R. Leavis, though he might be writing at essay length, is always the critic, never the essayist. Max Beerbohm is perpetually the essayist, even when he is writing criticism of the most ephemeral play.

A certain modesty of intention resides in the essay. It is a modesty inherent in the French verb that gives the form its name—*essayer*: to try, to attempt, to taste, to try on, to assay. However many words the essayist may avail himself of, he instinctively knows, or ought to know, that the last word cannot be his. If it is the last word an author wants, let him go write books. Not that the essayist need be light, a schmoozer, a kibitzer with a pen in his hand. As Percy A. Scholes, in *The Oxford Companion to Music,* characterizes Handel, so does the essayist aim to shape himself: "though facile he is never trivial." And sometimes the essayist can be profound. As Beethoven, quoted in the same *Oxford Companion to Music* article, remarked of Handel: "Go and learn of him how to achieve great effects with simple means."

Who becomes an essayist? What is the training? What aptitudes are required by the job? Nearly thirty years after attending a lecture by Stephen Potter, the one-upmanship man, I remain impressed by the answer Potter provided to a most woodenly phrased question from a graduate student in the audience. "Sir," this young man began, "you are a noted Coleridge scholar, a man of serious standing in the scholarly community, and this being so, I cannot help but wonder what it was that impelled you to write such works as *One-upmanship* and *Gamesmanship* —I cannot, sir, understand what strange turn in your intellectual life caused you to compose these most unusual books, whose philosophical implications, though interesting to be sure, are nonetheless puzzling in the extreme. My question, then, sir, not to put too fine a point on it, is, Why did you write these books?" Potter, who was got up for his lecture in a green suit and green tie and wore glasses with a green tint in them, the effect of all of which was to make his lank greyish hair also appear green, cleared his throat with a considerable harumph and, straightfaced as a goat, replied: "Out of work, you know."

"Out of work, you know" strikes me as quite as good an explanation as any other for why certain highly talented men and women turn to the writing of essays. Many among the great essayists did not set out to become essayists. Hazlitt, we know, wished to be a painter and a philosopher. Matthew Arnold, who began as a poet, stopped writing poetry while still a young man and turned to the essay. Max Beerbohm, though a considerable draughtsman, was an even more considerable essayist. Orwell, had he his druthers, no doubt would have wished to be remembered as a novelist, though today it is for his essays that he is most highly regarded, as least among people whose regard seems to be most valued. My general point is that few people can have set out to be essayists because the essay has never enjoyed the prestige that other genres or forms of art have enjoyed.

The essayist is someone with a strong urge to write and no other place to exercise this urge but the essay. He wishes to leave the stamp of his personality on the page—and, with great good luck, who knows, on the age. But he has discovered that the concentrated language and heightened emotion that is at the heart of serious poetic creation is not for him; nor is the dramatizing imagination that is required, along with a great deal of patience, by the novel. He is probably someone of wide curiosity and sufficient egotism to think that what is curious to him will also be curious to all the world. Not probably but certainly he is someone who desires to exert his will on the life of his times and who demands to have a hand in directing the contemporary traffic in ideas,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

manners, and morals. All these deficiencies, desires, and demands he is able to pour into that shapeless, bottomless, lovely receptacle, the essay.

Unlike other forms of writing—poetry, stories, plays—the essay is generally written less out of psychological need than out of the simpler need to respond to a political event, a cultural artifact, or the request of an editor. The last is very far from least, and indeed the development of the essay runs along a track side by side with the development of periodicals and magazines. In Walter Graham's intelligent survey, *English Periodical Literature* (1930), one can watch this twin development take place with an intertwined inevitability. There had been essayists before there were periodicals—Montaigne and Bacon, most notably, and Plutarch long before either of them—but with the spread of periodicals, particularly in England during the early eighteenth century under the reign of Queen Anne, periodical writing became a dependable way for essayists to earn their living along with retaining the hope, while doing so, of creating literature of permanent value.

The essay and the periodical were for a time precisely coextensive, and the *Tatler,* the *Spectator,* and the *Guardian* were known as "single-essay periodicals"—that is, a single essay made up the entire publication. The *Tatler* and the *Spectator* and, to a lesser extent, the *Guardian,* all the creations of that remarkable journalist Richard Steele, did not invent the periodical essay but, in the words of Walter Graham, "they produced it in its highest form." As Graham goes on to say: "Steele not only produced the first periodical journalism of lasting value; he was the first journalist to reveal the possibilities of the periodical as a medium for literature."[1]

But some say that Richard Steele's greatest accomplishment lay in bringing the world Joseph Addison. In many respects, Addison was the model essayist. He was a talented man with no particular ground on which to display his talents. He was one of the brightest men of his day at Oxford, which he entered at the age of fifteen. A Whig by temperament and sentiment, he was sent abroad on a pension arranged by Whig politicians—a pension he lost when William III died and Queen Anne, who had a strong aversion to the Whigs, removed it from him. Later he would serve the Whigs when they returned to power as Under Secretary of State, Chief Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and Secretary of State. But for the better part of his life his fortunes were tied to those of his party. Had the Whigs not fallen out of power, he might never have written essays.

Addison wrote poetry and he was famous in his day for his play *Cato,* which has been rendered nearly unreadable in ours. Macaulay, speaking of Addison's literary qualities, once remarked that he was a man "who reconciled wit with virtue." Macaulay also said that "to find anything more vivid than Addison's best portraits, we must go either to Shakespeare or Cervantes." Yet of course *Cato* cannot hold a candle to the worst of Shakespeare; and if Addison ever planned a novel, we know nothing about it. Instead this reputedly shy man, said by both Pope and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to be among the most charming conversationalists each had ever come across, this habitué of the London coffee houses whose lovely conversational engine required much in the way of wine for lubrication, this half-scholar, half-politician, half-poet, half-dramatist, finally found his métier and enduring fame in the essay.

Current-day publishing wisdom about the essay begins and ends with this canard: "Essays do not sell." But the essays of the *Spectator,* when reproduced in separate volumes, sold in their day notably well. As Macaulay reports: "Ten thousand copies of each volume were immediately taken off, and new editions were called for. It must be remembered that the population of England was then hardly a third of what it

1 The *Guardian* has just been re-published in a beautiful volume edited and with an introduction and notes by John Calhoun Stephens; the University Press of Kentucky, 825 pages, $55.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

now is. The number of Englishmen who were in the habit of reading was probably not a sixth of what it now is . . . . In these circumstances, the sale of the Spectator must be considered as indicating a popularity quite as great as that of the most successful works of Sir Walter Scott and Mr. Dickens in our own time."

Virginia Woolf said of Addison that it was owing to him that "prose is now prosaic." This sounds rather like a put-down, but what she meant by it was that Addison had taken the Gothic curlicues and Puritanical stiffness out of English prose and left it straightforward, flexible, and conversational: "the medium which makes it possible for people of ordinary intelligence to communicate their ideas to the world." It was Hazlitt, who in his *Lectures on the English Comic Writers,* noted that the essays of Addison and Steele "are more like the remarks which occur in a sensible conversation and less like a lecture. Something is left to the understanding of the reader." It was Hazlitt, too, who noted that Addison and Steele were in a direct line from Montaigne, "who in his Essays led the way to this kind of writing among the moderns," and who "had been the first who had the courage to say as an author what he felt as a man." Where Addison and Steele mark an advance in the form of the essay over Montaigne is in their taking for their subject their own thoughts as well as the world around them in all its variety, delight, and absurdity. Now the essay not only inquires into what human life is and has been but, to quote Hazlitt again, "follows it into courts and camps, into town and country, into rustic sports or learned disputations, into the various shades of prejudice or ignorance, of refinement or barbarism, into its private haunts or public pageants, into its weaknesses and littlenesses, its professions and its practices—before it pretends to distinguish right from wrong, or one thing from another." In sum, Hazlitt is describing the essay as he himself would come to write it.

In such essays as "On Familiar Style" and "On the Prose Style of Poets," Hazlitt set out his prescriptions for style in essay writing. "To write a genuine familiar or truly English style," he averred, "is to write as any one would speak in common conversation who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity, setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes." On more than one occasion, Hazlitt, who with qualification much admired Johnson ("The man was superior to the author"), attacked Johnson's style for its pomp and uniformity. "His subjects are familiar, but the author is always upon stilts." He was prepared to allow the deliberate archaicisms of Charles Lamb—"Mr. Lamb is the only imitator of old English style I can read with pleasure"—but for the rest he was for the plain style, in which "every word should be a blow; every thought should instantly grapple with its fellow." Because style and thought are unitary in Hazlitt, those who love the essay revere him to this day.

William Hazlitt was the first truly distinguished writer to earn his livelihood almost exclusively through the writing of essays. Then, as now, it was no easy row to hoe. Filled with strong opinions, political to the bone, never overly prudent about making enemies, Hazlitt took his living where he found it, writing for those papers and journals that could contain his strong views. (He was, after all, the author of an essay entitled "The Pleasure of Hating.") Yet, though much of Hazlitt's writing was done on the run, somehow much of it hangs together nicely: his writing on writers, his art criticism, his drama criticism, his familiar essays on such subjects as "The Fight," "The Indian Jugglers," "My First Acquaintance with Poets," to name only three among my own favorites. It all hangs together because it is all bound together by the glue of a courageous, complex, and contentious character who, for all the obstacles life set before him, never ceased to love life. Love of life, in my reading of them, is one of the qualities that all the great essayists hold in common.

With the advent and then the wide spread

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of periodicals and magazines, the nature and limits of essay writing changed correspondingly. Story writers and poets, though they may write with an eye toward particular journals, are not nearly as hostage as essayists to editors and the confinements of space and time set by their journals. (Although here I am reminded of a writer in a story by George P. Elliott who turned out high quality work of a perfectly unpublishable length: if memory serves, stories of ninety pages and poems of seventeen.) The essayist works under clear pressures, the pressures of prescribed length, the pressures of deadlines, the pressures of the possible prejudices of editors. One cannot read about the life of Hazlitt without a strong awareness of all these matters weighing down on him as he wrote. When his essays disappoint, which they sometimes do, my guess is that it is often because of the necessity of high production under these various pressures. Virginia Woolf remarked that many of Hazlitt's essays read like "fragments broken off from some larger book." Given the immensity of material Hazlitt produced—twenty-one volumes in the P. P. Howe edition of his collected writings—the wonder isn't that Hazlitt sometimes disappoints but that he is so frequently as good as he is.

It must also be said that these same pressures can have their advantages. The need to write for money may be a mixed blessing, but between writing for money and writing for no money, in my experience, writing for money is better. (Yet writing for larger sums does not necessarily give larger pleasure; there is also the quality of the audience one writes for to be considered.) Deadlines are of course damnable, but without them, as everyone who has written without them knows, less work would get done. Editors may have their prejudices, yet some are biased on behalf of intellectual tough-mindedness and can, in subtle ways, make even veteran writers write better. In this connection I have always been much taken by a passage in a letter Sydney Smith wrote to Francis Jeffrey, his editor at the *Edinburgh Review*. "I have three motives for writing reviews," Smith wrote, "1st. the love of you; 2nd the habit of reviewing; 3rd the love of money—to which I may add a fourth, the love of punishing fraud or folly."

While the Victorians offer a glittering roster of names among practitioners of the essay, the essay itself, during the age of Victoria, became less intimate. It grew longer; it began to address itself directly to serious things. Where it felt the need to become political, in the wider, cultural sense of politics, it did not hesitate to do so—as in the essays of Arnold, Carlyle, Ruskin. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, *Gentleman's Magazine* initiated a "review of books" section, but it was in the nineteenth century that books became, if not always the subject, at least the occasion for essays. Books provided the occasion, certainly, for many of the essays of Macaulay. The length at which such journals as the *Edinburgh Review* and *Blackwood's* allowed Macaulay to go on, for the most part cheerfully ignoring the book under review, cannot but be the envy of contemporary essayists, though it must be said of Macaulay's essays as Johnson once said of *Paradise Lost,* that no one ever wished them longer.

Virginia Woolf, in an essay entitled "The Modern Essay," remarks on this loss of intimacy among essayists during the Victorian era, and feels that the essay went into exile with the death of Charles Lamb only to emerge again in the person of Max Beerbohm. Beerbohm was of course "Max" to his readers—"the incomparable Max," in Bernard Shaw's phrase—and it was he who brought personality back into the essay. As Virginia Woolf says, "Matthew Arnold was never to his readers Matt, nor Walter Pater affectionately abbreviated in a thousand homes to Wat." Virginia Woolf adored Max Beerbohm—as do I—and rightly gauges his gift: "He has brought personality into literature, not unconsciously and impurely, but so consciously and purely that we do not know whether there is any relation between Max the essayist and Mr. Beerbohm the man." Yet one wonders if "personality" is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

precisely the word. Beerbohm's great trick, and a fine trick it is, was to be consummately familiar without ever imposing the burden of being personal. This trick is also called charm, and, as Virginia Woolf knew, charm is available in literature only to those who write supremely well.

Charm, though, is given to few, and the intimacy of personality need not be the only voice in which the essayist speaks. None but the most pretentious ass among their admirers would ever think of referring to Orwell as George or Mencken as Henry. Virginia Woolf, in my view, has too pure, too constricted a conception of the essayist. In a lovely essay of hers on Addison, she compares his writing to that of the lutenist, implying, by analogy, that the lute is the perfect instrument for the essayist. This, too, seems too restrictive. Among essayists there have also been the kettle drums of Carlyle, the French horn of Macaulay, the violin of Pater, the cello of Arnold, the trumpet of Mencken, the rich viola of Virginia Woolf herself . . . But I had better stop before I assemble a full symphony orchestra.

In this ensemble what instruments might George Orwell or Edmund Wilson play? Have we here two bassoonists on our hands? Clearly, there is nothing either charming or intimate about Orwell, who may nonetheless be the most widely admired among modern essayists. Orwell had great regard for Hazlitt, but his own work has none of Hazlitt's high coloring, its appetite for life, its positive passion. A great gloom spreads over much of Orwell's work. So much in the dark universe of his essays earns the epithets "vile" or "beastly." He had perhaps the sharpest olfactory system in modern literature, and the smells it brought back to be recorded in his work are, most of them, highly unpleasant. Yet for all their gloom, for all their grey, for all their grunge, Orwell's essays do not depress. They do not depress because the spectacle of a man writing exactly what he thinks in the teeth of a reigning orthodoxy, a man who hates sham and does his very best to prevent it from leaking into his own writing, is in itself a cheering thing. The essay, as a form, has an honored place for this, too.

Candor is not the spectacle that Edmund Wilson provides. As an essayist, he is quite devoid of charm, and intimacy, for reasons that his journals and autobiographical writings make plain, was alien to him. He wrote an impressive and confidently cadenced prose, yet in his vast body of work it is hard to think of any passages or even phrases that light fires in one's heart. Wilson brought reading and writing and the literary life into the domain of the essay through prose portraiture. (As Sainte-Beuve had done a century earlier in France.) A critic by temperament, he had the intelligence to know that if criticism is to have serious standing as literature it must turn to biography, where it can set ideas and writers in the context of their times. By doing precisely this Edmund Wilson made his own writing essayistic—and in the process turned criticism into literature.

But if I were confined to reading a single American essayist for the rest of my days that essayist would be H. L. Mencken. In Baltimore, at a dinner of the Mencken Society, I once asked an insurance man who was a member why he read Mencken. He did not stammer when answering, "Because he makes me feel good." This jibes perfectly with my own reaction to reading Mencken. How is Mencken, as an essayist, able to bring this off? In part through comedy, in part through the energy that vibrates through his prose, in part through high intelligence joined to great common sense. But in greater part Mencken achieves his effect through a quality that cannot be taught or learned or otherwise acquired—he achieves his effect through the magical transfer of *joie de vivre*. Mencken took joy in life after looking at life critically and taking full measure of its darkest side, not out of any idiot optimism. In one of the essays in one of his *Prejudices* volumes, Mencken wrote:

> No one knows Who created the visible universe, and it is infinitely improbable that anything properly describable as evidence on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> point will ever be discovered. No one knows what motives or intentions, if any, lie behind what we call natural laws. No one knows why man has his present form. No one knows why sin and suffering were sent into this world—that is, why the fashioning of man was so badly botched.

Yet one can almost see him, after striking off that passage, setting down his cigar, pushing his chair back from his typewriter, and remarking, "I know this to be true, but that is no reason not to get a good dinner."

I have dwelt on the essayists who have meant most to me—this is, you might say, the essayist's prerogative—and left out at least two American essayists who are elsewhere much revered but to whose virtues I am apparently blind: Ralph Waldo Emerson and E. B. White. (And one other whom I do care about and to whose virtues I do not think I am blind—A. J. Liebling.) Emerson is too vatic for me; in his essays he takes such large bites yet leaves one with so little upon which to chew. He bounds from pronunciamento to pronunciamento, and while his generalities do often glitter, I believe that it is in its particularities that the truth of the essay resides. E. B. White writes a pellucid prose, but his subjects have never engaged me. Gertrude Stein once said about Glenway Westcott that his writing has a certain syrup but it does not pour; so, for me, do the fluent essays of E. B. White pour and pour but no syrup comes out.

While there is not today a general essayist who gives the pleasure of Mencken, or a political essayist of the clean power of Orwell, or a literary essayist of the range of Edmund Wilson (Gore Vidal not long ago nominated himself for the latter post, though no one could be found to second the nomination), as a form the essay nonetheless seems to be flourishing. Here is a partial list of contemporary practitioners, as various in their interests as in their methods: V. S. Naipaul, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Edward Hoagland, Cynthia Ozick, Elizabeth Hardwick, Lewis Thomas, Gore Vidal, Susan Sontag, and Wendell Berry. (In an earlier generation there had been Lionel Trilling, Robert Warshow, and the young James Baldwin.) Some of these are, in an odd sense, almost regional writers: Tom Wolfe is best on the Manhattan status life, Joan Didion is best on the cultures of California, Edward Hoagland is best outside city limits. A number of the writers I have named are also novelists, yet, with the exception of Naipaul, none is anywhere near so good in his fiction as in his essays. Why, one wonders, should this be so?

I wonder if it doesn't have something to do with the fact that the essay as a form is in the happy condition of having no avant-garde tradition. I say happy condition because, great though the benefits of the avant-garde tradition have been in poetry and fiction, this same avant-garde tradition—and I trust no one will think the juxtaposition of avant-garde and tradition is oxymoronic—can exert a tyrannous pull to keep changing, to do it as no one has done it before, to make it, perpetually and (as it sometimes seems) depressingly, new. The essay is under no such tyranny. The idea of an avant-garde essayist, far from being oxymoronic, is merely moronic.

Not that the essayist cannot dazzle, turn you around, knock your socks off. He can. Not that there haven't been radical changes in the way that essays have been written. There have. Yet in even the most experimental essay writing—some of the essays, for example, of William Gass—there is something old shoe about the relationship between the essayist and his reader. "It's just you and me, kid," the essayist implies when he puts pen to paper. "I realize that," the reader in effect responds. "What's your point in this essay, Bub?" However much art there may be in his writing, the essayist cannot hide behind the claim to be an artist, like Dr. Pepper, so misunderstood. He must stand and deliver. He must provide instruction, entertainment, persuasion, or the reader, like the young woman in the joke about the seducer who took the time to put shoe trees in his shoes, will be gone.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I grew up at a time when the novelist was the great cultural hero, and the novel, if it was written with power or subtlety (or both), seemed the most heroic cultural act. But, for a complex of reasons, the novel seems to be going through a bad patch right now. The essay, though it can never replace the novel, does appear to be taking up some of the slack. It is a form with distinguished predecessors and rich traditions, and between its generous boundaries one can do almost anything one wishes: report anecdotes, tell jokes, make literary criticisms, polemicize, bring in odd scraps of scholarship, recount human idiosyncrasy in its full bountifulness, let the imagination roam free. Subjects are everywhere, and there is no shortage of cultivated and appreciative readers. Don't spread it around, but it's a sweet time to be an essayist.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A summoning of spirits: James Merrill and *Sandover*

by Bruce Bawer

I glean from what I am
A fine self-centered glue.
—James Merrill, "The Pardoner's Tale"

James Merrill's principal work of poetry, *The Changing Light at Sandover,*[1] has appeared piece by piece. "The Book of Ephraim" was published in 1976, as the larger part of his volume *Divine Comedies*; *Mirabell: Books of Number* followed in 1978; and *Scripts for the Pageant* closed out the trilogy in 1980. Praise and prizes have come his way as a result: *Divine Comedies* won Merrill a Pulitzer, *Mirabell* brought him his second National Book Award, and when in 1982 Merrill gathered all the parts together and attached a new coda, entitled "The Higher Keys," he won the National Book Critics' Circle Award. One wonders whether the judges even bothered to read *Sandover* before deciding to grant it these honors: the most cursory inspection, after all, proves that in size, in scope, in seriousness, nothing of the past few years could possibly have hoped to compete with it. Twice the size of the average novel, *Sandover* aims to be nothing less than the Atomic Age's answer to Dante, a *Paradiso* for this cynical yet superstitious century of Mesdames Sosostris and Blavatsky. Like Dante, Merrill learns everything he always wanted to know about the hereafter but was afraid to ask; his journey of knowledge, however, begins not with the wrong turn in a dusky wood, but with the act of setting up house with his lover David Jackson in a village of strangers called Stonington, Connecticut, way back in the Eisenhower era, and—soon thereafter—breaking out a Ouija board and mirror.

And what wonders ensued when they sat themselves down at that board, facing that mirror! The very first night, they met the first of their spirit friends (whose messages, spelled out on the board, are presented throughout *Sandover* in upper-case letters):

> Correct but cautious, that first night, we asked
> Our visitor's name, era, habitat.
> EPHRAIM came the answer. A Greek Jew
> Born AD 8 at XANTHOS. Where was that?
> In Greece WHEN WOLVES & RAVENS WERE
> IN ROME

Ephraim identifies himself as a concubine of the emperor Tiberius and says that he died in A.D. 36 on Capri, "throttled/By the imperial guard for having LOVED/THE MONSTERS NEPHEW (sic) CALIGULA." (That's Merrill's *sic,* of course.) After taking a moment to describe himself as "blond, sun-kissed,/Honey-eyed, tall," Ephraim announces to Merrill and Jackson (known in *Sandover* as JM and DJ) some essential facts about life, death, and the cosmos. Everybody on earth, for instance, is the "representative" of a heavenly "patron"—a guardian

1 *The Changing Light at Sandover*; Atheneum, 560 pages, $12.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

angel of sorts. These heavenly nannies "fume and fuss/For what must seem eternity over us." Each of us is reincarnated a few times, with brief respites in Heaven between lives, and eventually ascends to Heaven permanently, to become a patron, "tak[ing] delivery from the Abyss/Of brand-new little savage souls to watch." As patrons, we then ascend gradually through the nine stages of Paradise, and "with every rise in station/Comes a degree of PEACE FROM REPRESENTATION." The structure of Heaven, then, is not unlike that of the civil service. Merrill's patron, it develops, is one Kinton Ford (born 1810, died 1843), an editor of Pope's works, whose existence he has been unable to establish, but whose patronage, Merrill is convinced, is responsible for his own fondness for couplets. Merrill is told that he is on his last life—he has, presumably, attained enough distinction in this world to deserve promotion to the next. (One exception to this rule of merit promotion is Mozart, who has earned Heaven but for love of life has continued to be reincarnated, and is at present "A BLACK ROCK STAR/WHATEVER THAT IS.")

Such, then, is "The Book of Ephraim." The cosmology is silly, but Merrill makes it work by keeping the prosy spirit-talk to a minimum, and pressing into continuous service his formidable gifts for form and wordplay. There is some lovely writing here, for example, the scene in Venice in section "W,"

> When in the flashing pink-and-golden calm
> Appears a youth, to mount the bridge's stairs.
> His pack and staff betoken those who come
>
> From far off, as do sunburnt forehead, hair's
> Long thicket merman-blond, the sparkling blue
> Gaze which remembrance deep in mine compares
>
> With one met in some other sphere—but who,
> Where, when? Dumbly I call up settings, names,
> The pilgrim ever nearer, till we two
>
> Cry out together, Wendell! Uncle James!
> It's Betsy's child, whom I last saw—life passes
> In a mirage of claims and counterclaims—
>
> When he was six or seven. He confesses
> He knew me only from a photograph
> As any stranger with an eye for faces
>
> Might have done—faces being (a shy laugh)
> What draw him, and vice versa: why enroll
> In art school when all Europe—! And now half
>
> Wishes to leave me, having bared the soul
> Of an, I reckon, eighteen year old boy.

The poetic (and human) touches are fewer and farther between, however, in *Mirabell.* Merrill's own voice begins to fade out, and he and Jackson are nudged into the background as armies of new, more knowledgeable, and pushier spirits appear on the scene to unburden themselves of pages of putative, incurably prosaic revelation that Merrill does not trouble to edit or subsume or versify. The poem begins in 1975; JM and DJ have not been in touch with the spirit world for a long time, but DJ's mother is about to die, and, in search of solace, the two men drag out the Ouija board once more. Before long they have met a host of spirits—some of them the ghosts of deceased friends and relatives, and some complete strangers—and find themselves the focus of a cosmic clique that demands "3 OF YOUR YEARES MORE . . . WE MUST HAVE/POEMS OF SCIENCE THE WEORK FINISHT IS BUT A PROLOGUE."

Thenceforth things get increasingly muddled, as the spirits spew out reams of misty pseudoscientific gibberish about atoms, molecules, neutrons, electrons, spin, antiparticles, red shift, black holes, photons, DNA, apocalyptic fire, and Adam and Eve. "THE TRUE POET IS, OF ALL THE SCRIBES, MOST DRAWN/TO THE CONCRETE," quips the spirit of Auden in *Mirabell,* but the spirit-poets of *Sandover* seem inescapably attracted to dopey, pretentious abstractions about "THE ATOMS OF DEMOCRITUS, THE BRIGHT/DANCE OF NEWTON'S

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PARTICLES," and so forth, the ultimate point apparently being that in some nebulous, numinous way the energy of the atom *is* God, or life, or at least mankind ("THE ATOM IT IS ADAM"), and that therefore nuclear power poses more than a routine threat. Okay, fine. But it's hardly an original lesson, and the way Merrill's spirits choose to teach it is far from inspired: watching the poet and his paradisaical pals toss about all these half-understood concepts (gleaned, I would guess, from Merrill's readings in elementary physics) is about as enlightening as listening to Niels Bohr lecture on Proust. One gathers, in *Mirabell,* that Merrill's own life has been put on hold so that he can spend his time recording and reflecting upon the enigmatic wisdom ("ELECTRICAL POWER IS ORGANIC,/ATOMIC POWER . . . GALACTIC?") vouchsafed him by his spirits. Merrill is telling the truth when he says, "Dear Mirabell, words fail us. How banal/Our lives would be, how shrunken, but for you."

In *Scripts,* even more (and grander) spirits move in, and JM and DJ step even further upstage. Often they aren't included at all in the dialogue; we get scripts of the pharaoh Akhenaton talking to Michael (the Angel of Light), the painter Raphael talking to a dwarf, the angel Gabriel talking to Nefertiti, Plato talking to Michael, Michael talking to Auden, and so on. All of these big-name spirits have converged on JM and DJ's humble home in order to explain the universe to them, but nothing is ever truly explained. "WHAT MEANT BY PLAN? WORKS? WHAT BY MASTER? AND WHAT, AT THE GOLDEN END, BY PARADISE?" says Michael at one point. The reader cannot help but ask the same questions. What *is* meant by all the terms thrown around in this book? We never get much of an answer. An abstraction is introduced only to be defined in terms of another abstraction, which in turn is defined in terms of another abstraction; a "revelation" is presented only to be overturned by another revelation, which in turn is overturned by a third revelation. JM and DJ learn in "Ephraim," for example, that Auden and Plato are close friends in Heaven. ("What's Plato *like*?" they ask.) In *Scripts,* however, Jackson has a sudden insight: "Tell me I'm wrong./*Wystan is Plato.* Has been all along." And not only is Auden Plato, but Maria, the lovers' second oldest spirit-friend, turns out to be Plato too! ("*You,* all along, were *Plato*?") Then, in "The Higher Keys," Michael, the all-knowing Angel of Light, proves to be identical with Ephraim, JM and DJ's sweet, simple original contact, whom they thought they had shuttled aside long ago. ("DJ: You wouldn't be . . . Lord Michael? Y E S/—Two gasps. Then long, enchanted certainty.") Emmanuel, the Water Angel, is revealed to be none other than Jesus Christ. ("Emmanuel/Was *Christ*?") And finally, everybody—Auden, Maria, Plato, Emmanuel, Michael, the whole gang—turns out to have been Ephraim: "It was You, You always, the whole time." If the half-comprehended scientific terms tossed about in *Mirabell* tend to put one in mind of the bad science fiction movies of the 1950s, the revelations clustered toward the end of *Sandover* are all too reminiscent of the final reels of innumerable suspense thrillers of the same era, with their series of all-too-amazing yet none-too-interesting (or meaningful) recognitions and reversals.

What, then, does *Sandover* add up to? Its critics have so far made little progress toward answering that question. Thrown off by the unorthodoxy of the thing, many of them have failed to review the poem, and have instead reviewed Merrill and Jackson's experience. "Even if the two did make all of it up unconsciously," writes Judith Moffett, "an experience has befallen them scarcely less amazing and wonderful than if, like the prophets of old, they had heard God's voice address them aloud."[2] More than one critic has quoted Merrill's sly comment to an interviewer: "If the spirits aren't external, how astonishing the mediums become!" I call

2 Moffett's book is *James Merrill: An Introduction to the Poetry*; Columbia University Press, 247 pages, $20.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

this sly because it's a very cleverly designed Catch-22: either we accept JM and DJ as Heaven's chosen mediums, or we recognize them as the most brilliant creative minds of our time. Too many critics seem to have fallen into Merrill's trap, and approached the poem on these terms—which, of course, are ridiculous. Merrill is not Moses and *The Changing Light at Sandover* is not the Pentateuch. It is simply a poem, and it should be judged as such.

Granted, both Merrill and Jackson have attested to their belief in the spirits. But then again, so did Yeats (who, incidentally, according to Merrill's spirits, "MOVES DJ'S HAND" and would thus seem to be responsible in some sense for *Sandover*). Yeats too, of course, was a student of spirits ("Yeats' wife, between snores,/Gave utterance to an immense conceit," Merrill recalls in *Mirabell*), and he recorded their teachings in his bizarre book of prose, *A Vision,* whose introduction tells the story of the encounter:

> On the afternoon of October 24th, 1917, four days after my marriage, my wife surprised me by attempting automatic writing. What came in disjointed sentences, in almost illegible writing, was so exciting, sometimes so profound, that I persuaded her to give an hour or two day after day to the unknown writer, and after some half-dozen such hours offered to spend what remained of life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences. "No," was the answer, "we have come to give you metaphors for poetry." . . . Some will ask whether I believe in the actual existence of my circuits of sun and moon . . . . To such a question I can but answer that if sometimes, overwhelmed by miracle as all men must be when in the midst of it, I have taken such periods literally, my reason has soon recovered; and now that the system stands out clearly in my imagination I regard them as stylistic arrangements of experience comparable to the cubes in the drawing of Wyndham Lewis and to the ovoids in the sculpture of Brancusi. They have helped me to hold in a single thought reality and justice.

Merrill's story is surprisingly similar. Like Yeats, he first hears from the spirit world soon after setting up house with his new consort. Like Yeats, he needs the cooperation of that consort to maintain contact with his spirits. Like Yeats, Merrill is led to understand eventually that his spirits are dealing in imagery: "Something tells me all this Flame and Fall/Has to be largely metaphorical," Merrill comments in regard to their revelations. Like Yeats, Merrill acknowledges that he is far from a believer in the literal truth of the grand system disclosed by his communicants. ("The reader who can't swallow it," he has said, "has my full sympathy. I've choked on it again and again.") Like Yeats, however, Merrill never goes so far as to suggest that his spirits don't exist.

In the case of Yeats, of course, this state of affairs need not trouble us too greatly. We can write off *A Vision* as utter nonsense, if we so wish, without disturbing in the slightest our admiration for the poems—among them, "The Second Coming" and "Sailing to Byzantium"—whose images derive from the system described in its pages. *The Changing Light at Sandover,* however, is another matter. For Merrill's poem does not merely draw on an incredible cosmology for its images; its purpose is to present that cosmology. *Sandover* is, in other words, not Merrill's counterpart to "The Second Coming" or "Sailing to Byzantium" or any other poem, so much as it is his counterpart to *A Vision.* Thus Merrill is, in a sense, even more ambitious than Yeats, for Yeats never attempted to make poetry out of the undigested facts as handed to him by *his* spirits. And for this one must admire Yeats's sagacity. *A Vision* at least presents a straightforward (if complex) system of symbols whose usefulness (to a modern poet concerned with order and chaos, will and fate, and intellect and action) is obvious. Does *Sandover* offer as much? Do its "revelations" add up to an effective stylistic arrangement of experience? Is the poem possessed of some grand metaphorical truth that shines through the network of implausible details?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For most readers the answer is likely to be no. *Sandover* may well present Merrill's image of a perfectly organized universe, but it is an image born of some very unheavenly prejudices. The upper crust of Merrill's Heaven, to be specific, is composed almost exclusively of the spirits of homosexual men, many of them poets, most of them privileged, and nearly all of them afflicted with an annoying, stereotypical homosexual way of speaking, with its French tags *("comme ça," "par exemple")* and terms of endearment *("mes chers," "mes enfants")* and what Judith Moffett likes to think of as "witty camp chitchat." One of the spirits, for example, coos that composer Richard Strauss (who is apparently up there with them) is "A DARLING." Another refers to the creation of the universe, or some phase thereof, as "A CHARMING EXPERIMENT." The spirit of Nefertiti, conjured by Michael, is described in the following terms: "I MES ENFANTS/WAS THRILLED BY NEF A PRESENCE OF PURE AMBER/ROBED IN 18TH DYNASTY HAUTE COUTURE/ OVERWHELMING MICHAEL CAN DO IT ALL!" Ephraim (who shares with most of the other spirits a Merrillian penchant for puns) comments on JM and DJ's physiques: "MY DEARS I AM BEST SUITED WHEN U STRIP." And Chester Kallman, Auden's lover, about to be reborn in Johannesburg as a non-white, non-gay non-poet, whines: "CAN Y CONCEIVE OF LIFE WITHOUT THOSE 3???" Merrill replies, "Well, frankly, yes." But the whole of *Sandover* stands as testimony to the contrary. It visualizes the universe as a playground for an elite, indolent clique of white, gay, male poets, dead and alive. The rest of humanity, on the rare occasions when it enters the poem, appears in the form of servants—cleaning ladies, oil deliverymen, lift boys, porters, chambermaids. Indeed, the spirits make it clear that it is primarily JM and DJ's homosexuality that renders them deserving of Heaven's version of higher education. Homosexuality, according to the logic of the *Sandover* spirits, makes JM and DJ masters of the mind:

> LOVE OF ONE MAN FOR ANOTHER OR
> LOVE BETWEEN WOMEN
> IS A NEW DEVELOPMENT OF THE PAST
> 4000 YEARS
> ENCOURAGING SUCH MIND VALUES AS
> PRODUCE THE BLOSSOMS
> OF POETRY & MUSIC, THOSE 2 PRIN-
> CIPAL LIGHTS OF
> GOD BIOLOGY. LESSER ARTS NEEDED
> NO EXEGETES:
> ARCHITECTURE SCULPTURE THE
> MOSAICS & PAINTINGS THAT
> FLOWERD IN GREECE & PERSIA CELE-
> BRATED THE BODY.
> POETRY MUSIC SONG INDWELL
> & CELEBRATE THE MIND . . .
> HEART IF U WILL

Heterosexuals cannot excel in the arts that celebrate the mind because

> MIND IN ITS PURE FORM IS A NON-
> SEXUAL PASSION
> OR A UNISEXUAL ONE PRODUCING ONLY
> LIGHT.
> FEW PAINTERS OR SCULPTORS CAN
> ENTER THIS LIFE OF THE MIND.
> THEY (LIKE ALL SO-CALLD NORMAL
> LOVERS) MUST PRODUCE AT LAST
> BODIES THEY DO NOT EXIST FOR
> ANY OTHER PURPOSE.

Homosexuality, in short, is the sign of a highly developed mind, and predisposes one to greatness in the arts of the mind—poetry and music. Painting and sculpture, as arts of the body (and, therefore, "lesser arts"!), are principally the province of heterosexuals. Merrill tries to make us think that he is offended by this foolishness. "Certain very great/Poets and musicians have been straight," he asserts, and points out that Michelangelo, a practitioner of the heterosexual arts of painting and sculpture, was homosexual. But his protest is only a rhetorical gesture. For, in its fundamentals, the spirits' hypothesis accords completely with Merrill's own sentiment, often expressed in his poetry, that the childlessness of homosexual poets "turns us/Outward to the les-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sons and mysteries"—in other words, that because they cannot have children, homosexuals are more devoted to their poetry than heterosexual poets can possibly be. In "Up and Down," a poem from *Braving the Elements* (1972), Merrill has written affectingly of being given a ring by his mother "for when you marry. For your bride. It's yours."

> I do not tell her, it would sound theatrical,
> *Indeed, this green room's mine, my very life.*
> *We are each other's; there will be no wife;*
> *The little feet that patter here are metrical.*[3]

The reaction of most critics to the heterophobia of *Sandover* has been either to ignore it or to explain it away. Judith Moffett, for example, claims that "Merrill cannot, in the ordinary sense, be held accountable" for the views expressed by his spirit-friends, for

> by the terms of his commission he may—indeed must—paraphrase, condense, question, even criticize, as well as change prose to poetry. But he is not to decide which ideas to keep and which to exclude: is not to censor, embellish, nor in any way distort the *sense* of the revealed text. Thus restricted, he can take no more responsibility for its nature than John Constable could for the concepts of *cow* or *hundred-year-old oak* when he set out to paint the landscapes of East Anglia.

If one is organizing a new religious sect around *Sandover,* this cop-out is perfectly acceptable; if one is supposed to be performing an act of literary criticism, however, one is obliged to come to some conclusion as to the nature of the connection between the author and the ideas presented in his text. That Merrill criticizes the spirits' uglier prejudices, in the same way that he makes cynical comments about their more fantastic disclosures, is no surprise; such remarks are rhetorical devices, calculated to anticipate, and thereby blunt, our own reactions. One cannot help but feel that the *Sandover* spirits are also a rhetorical device, in fact Merrill's most effective one yet, since through them he is, for the first time, completely free to say what he really thinks without having to take responsibility for it. While presenting himself as a good-natured, tolerant gentleman, he can, with absolute impunity, communicate the notion that "THE MASSES WE NEED NEVER CONSIDER THEY REMAIN IN AN ANIMAL STATE" and envision a universe in which select "Lab souls" stand in opposition to "THE DULLWITTED, THE MOB, THE IDIOT IN POWER, THE PURELY BLANK OF MIND."

Merrill's almost abnormal aloofness from the world around him—in particular, from heterosexuals, the middle class, the nonartistic (in short, from virtually everybody)—is manifest in a number of his poems:

> I rarely buy a newspaper, or vote.
> To do so, I have learned, is to invite
> The tread of a stone guest within my house.

As one might infer from such lines, the strength of Merrill's verse is its ability to convey his perceptions and emotions; by the same token, its great weakness is its failure to investigate, in any depth, the mind and soul of anyone—whether real or imagined—other than Merrill himself. For a poet, he is all too indifferent to the things and people of this earth that he does not find immediately diverting. When he does bring other people into his verse, they are usually ficelles, or symbols, or mere markers, of one sort or another, on the road of Merrill's life. Not surprisingly, the most vivid character in all of *Sandover* is Wendell, Merrill's nephew, who is not only artistic and wealthy like his uncle but (according to Moffett, at least) wholly imaginary. Helen Vendler suggests that the remarkable thing about Merrill's poetry is that he makes contemporary American readers feel that he is "someone out there . . . writing down your century, your generation, your life," but she is absolutely mistaken. On the contrary, the remarkable

3 "Up and Down" may be found in Merrill's selected poems, *From the First Nine: Poems 1946-1976*; Atheneum, 362 pages, $10.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thing about Merrill's art is that, although he ignores most of us—the way we live, the way we think—he gains our attention nonetheless. Uninterested in empathizing with us, he makes us empathize with him. The mountain comes to Mohammed.

Though *Sandover*'s literary value does not hinge in the slightest on the question of whether Merrill actually received messages on his Ouija board, so much has been written about this question that one feels obliged to speak to it. I have said that Merrill's spirits are masks, the vehicles by means of which the poet conveys certain attitudes. But to say this is not to deny the possibility that their messages actually did appear, in some form or another, on that famous Ouija board, without the conscious prodding of either the poet or his lover. If such is the case, then we must recognize that the spirits are a device not of Merrill's conscious mind but of his unconscious mind.[4] Hard to accept? Perhaps. But then, if we choose to buy the Ouija-board story, we don't really have much of a choice. Either we acknowledge the spirits' voices as those of Merrill's subconscious mind, or we commit ourselves to a belief in a very peculiar hereafter. To my mind, the lesser of the two absurdities is the notion that Merrill's spirits are a psychological phenomenon.

Besides, when one considers the circumstances under which Merrill's spirits announce themselves, the Ouija-board voices are not so absurd as one might think. It is worth noting that at the outset of "Ephraim," Merrill and Jackson are both homosexual men who feel alienated from a mostly heterosexual world; their taking up residence together, in a town where they know no one, sharply accentuates their sense of alienation. Ephraim, like any good defense mechanism, comes along at precisely the right time, opening up to them a whole universe of homosexual male poets like themselves. The psychiatrist who tells Merrill that he and Jackson are engaged in a hot and heavy *folie à deux* hits the nail right on the head. Naturally, Merrill, the card-carrying neo-Platonist, who is by nature inclined to think of spirits as being realer and finer folk than us corporeal types, doesn't cherish seeing those spirits reduced to Freudian phenomena. Yet there are times in *Sandover* when he seems to recognize the unconscious origin of his heavenly voices. He cites Stevens:

> Stevens imagined the imagination
> And God as one; the imagination, also,
> As that which presses back, in parlous times,
> against "the pressure of reality."

And he paraphrases Jung:

> Jung says—or if he doesn't, all but does—
> That God and the Unconscious are one. Hm.

But he is perhaps most reminiscent of Emerson, whom he does not quote in this regard, but whose words in "The Over-Soul" echo in the lines of *Sandover*. "We are all discerners of spirits," Emerson writes. The voice that comes from within, no matter how it may find its way out, *is* the voice of Heaven, of God, of absolute truth. "The soul is the perceiver and revealer of truth." Trust, then, in the subconscious, for

> we are wiser than we know. If we will not interfere with our thought, but will act entirely, or see how the thing stands in God, we know the particular thing, and every thing, and every man. For, the Maker of all things and all persons, stands behind us, and casts his dread omniscience through us over things.

Though Merrill clearly finds such formulations as Jung's and Stevens's congenial, he does not commit himself to them. He just

4 It is embarrassing to have to point this out, but Moffett is not the only critic of *Sandover* who seems less than willing to accept this explanation. "Clearly [the explanation that Merrill's spirits are products of his subconscious mind] will not do," writes Dean Flower in *The Hudson Review*, Winter 1983-84; "how can unconscious twitches sound like W. H. Auden or know all about DNA?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mulls them over briefly ("Hm."), accepts them as possibilities, and then drops them. He is not an analyst. As far as he is concerned, perhaps his subconscious *is* behind all this, perhaps not. Deep down, it doesn't matter to him. Indeed, he's happier not knowing. Anti-scientific, anti-logical, and passionately in love with mystery, he is possessed of a prodigious lack of interest in the causes of things. As he writes in "Ephraim" of himself and his lover,

> We'd long since slept through our last talk
> on Thomist
> Structures in Dante. Causes
> Were always lost—on us. We shared the traits
> Of both the dumbest
>
> Boy in school and that past master of clauses
> Whose finespun mind "no idea violates."

Of course, Merrill is not suggesting that he and Jackson are dumb. On the contrary, he obviously considers their anti-intellectuality (as Eliot considered that which he claimed to observe in Henry James) to be the mark of some extraordinary native artistic genius; and one consequence of this genius, to Merrill's way of thinking, is their persistent lack of curiosity about the nature and provenance of their spirit-friends. This lack of curiosity, this resolve "never to forego, in favor of/Plain dull proof, the marvelous nightly pudding" at the Ouija board, explains, I think, how it is possible for the *folie* to have gone on for so long. To Merrill and Jackson alike, the idea is not to solve a mystery, but to experience it, to explore the foggy frontier between reality and imagination, between the physical world and the world we touch only with our minds. To Merrill, this exploration is what poetry is all about. It is certainly what *Sandover* is about. Like Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander,* Merrill's poem recognizes the difficulty of drawing a line between the real and the imagined, celebrates the creative artist's intuitive awareness of this difficulty, and pays homage to the wonderful talent that enables him to move and mediate between the two spheres and to make the borderland between them his special province. All the "Flame and Fall" of *Sandover,* then, *is* metaphorical: whether he consciously intends them to or not, Merrill's spirits represent, quite plainly, the Godhead that resides in the soul of every artist.

A promising theme. It is especially unfortunate, therefore, that Merrill should have thought it wise, in such a work, to yoke Godhead with homosexuality, to mix the ludicrously inappropriate lingo of Fire Island with the barely comprehended argot of the physics department, and to make less than consistent use of his incomparable gift for rich and rhythmic poetic language. That proof of this gift shines out brightly in various quarters of *The Changing Light at Sandover* only makes the poem's deficiencies all the more lamentable.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Coming this summer:

MOMA reopened: a special issue of *The New Criterion*

Hilton Kramer writes on The Museum of Modern Art

On June 29, *The New Criterion* will publish an extra edition of the magazine, entirely devoted to the reopening of the Museum of Modern Art. Written by Hilton Kramer, *The New Criterion*'s editor, the issue will provide extensive coverage and historical analysis of this important event. The text will be accompanied by carefully selected and necessary illustrations documenting the Museum's present role on the American and world art scene.

This exciting example of *The New Criterion*'s coverage of the visual arts will be sent without charge to the magazine's subscribers. It will also be available on newsstands and in museum bookstores across the United States. The single copy price will be $3.50.

Single copy and bulk orders should be directed to the Business Manager, The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York City 10019, 212/247-6980.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Poems *by James Aitchison, Eugenio Montale, & David Wagoner*

In the north

Light fades slowly in the long evenings of May and June
here in the north. The eyes adjust
and when I straighten up from a seedbed
I can still make out the darker shapes of the swifts
against an archipelago of clouds
and the outline of a thrush
singing from the top branch of a plum tree.

I feel the stiffness and the aching satisfaction of tasks.
I put the tools away
while I can still see the path to the outhouse.
Indoors, I switch on the light
and begin to wash off the stains of earth and calomel dust.
The thrush calls out and I look from the window
on to an incomprehensible darkness.

I stare until I see the deeper mass
of apple trees and plum trees
and the boundary wall,
black shapes with nothing in between them
except the glint of glass in the greenhouse
and my reflection out there
waiting like another self at ease in the night.

—James Aitchison

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A visit

It was dark when we got there.
The lamp above the lintel
was too small for so much darkness.
The door was unlocked, just as she'd said,
and when we opened it and called her name
we heard the echo in the passageway.
Hand in hand we followed the sound along the corridor,
up the stone staircase,
across the gallery and into the light.

She'd left the curtains open.
You sat near her in the window seat
and I saw stars shine through your far reflections.
I heard your voices
saying herbs and pottery and hives
like two off-duty druid priestesses.
You spoke as if I weren't there.

When you laughed and leaned together
strands of her hair caught in yours
and yours in hers.
I heard your voices
saying lavender and fire and queens.
And where the strands drifted apart
I saw your reflections out there, your backs towards me.
I said nothing, afraid you'd come in from the night
with your lips, your tongues dripping with honey and flames.

—James Aitchison

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Per album

Assicurato
che il cuore non invecchia
il pentalaureato
si guarda nello specchio
con orrore.

—*Eugenio Montale*

L'evoluzione biologica
ha un passo così lento che a quel metro
la lumaca è un fulmine.
C'è voluta non so che iradiddio
prima che fosse nato l'archetipo di un bipede.
Non è questo lo strano; lo strano è
che tutto ciò sembri lungimiranza.
Bisognerà trovare un altro nome
per spiegare l'arcano.

—*Eugenio Montale*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For an album

Assured
that the heart never ages
the man weighed down with honors
looks at himself in the mirror
with horror.

—translated by
Jonathan Galassi

Biological evolution
proceeds so slowly that at its pace
the snail is lightning.
I don't know what scourge it took
before the archetype of a biped was born.
That's not what's strange; what's strange
is that it all looks like farsightedness.
We'll have to find another name
to explain the arcane.

—translated by
Jonathan Galassi

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

La vita in prosa

Il fatto è che la vita non si spiega
né con la biologia
né con la teologia.
La vita é molto lunga
anche quando è corta
come quella della farfalla—
la vita è sempre prodiga
anche quando la terra non produce nulla.
Furibonda è la lotta che si fa
per renderla inutile e impossibile.
Non resta che il pescaggio nell'inconscio
l'ultima farsa del nostro moribondo teatro.
Manderei ai lavori forzati o alla forca
chi la professa o la subisce. È chiaro che l'ignaro
è più che sufficiente per abbuiare il buio.

—*Eugenio Montale*

Non occorrono tempi lunghi

per i cercatori di funghi
ma basta un battibaleno
per apprendere che non ha senso
buccinare di tempi vuoti o pieni.
Non esistono tempi corti
per fare che lo spazio si raggrumi
nel solo punto che conta
e sembra anche ridicolo parlare
di vivi e morti.

—*Eugenio Montale*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

La vie en prose

The fact is life is not explained
by biology
or theology.
Life is very long
even when it's short
like the butterfly's—
life is always prodigal
even when the earth produces nothing.
Furious the struggle we put up
to make it useless and impossible.
All that's left is fishing in the unconscious
the last farce of our dying theater.
I'd sentence those who practice it, or submit,
to hard labor or the gallows. It's clear the ignorant
are more than sufficient to darken the darkness.

—translated by
Jonathan Galassi

It doesn't take a long time

for the mushroom hunters
but an instant's enough
to learn there's no sense
trumpeting about time being empty or full.
There's no short time
in which space can come to a head
in the one point that counts
and it also seems ridiculous to speak
of the living and dead.

—translated by
Jonathan Galassi

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Coming home late with the bad young man

So many tangled feet from home among toads
No bigger than junebugs hopping at mosquitoes
Dizzily we could keep our head while all
About us the wobbly sprinklers were losing theirs
To the night over lawns like upside-down chandeliers
Along the sidewalk to make it glassy-eyed
To the steps not stopping soaked on the front porch
With the right key in our hand held wrong side up
The first try under the gasp of the screendoor stopper
As soft as the click of the nightlatch being good
At keeping strictly quiet the bad young man
Amounting to nothing risking hell tiptoeing
Sockfoot along our hallway breathless with beer
To squeak the floor in time with our father's snoring
But caught in the act between dull saws out of step
By our mother's forgiving unforgetful ears
In the darkness arms outstretched for the sneaky brother
Who lived inside our head not saying prayers
Not thinking purely of girls who believed in virgins
Tomcatting out to lead us gladly astray
To show us the way to go home to let us down
On our bed who didn't brush our teeth not washing
The lipstick off our face who couldn't find
Our pajamas with all four hands who lay there staring
Like a mind's eye groggily dimly at the ceiling
As we turned to fall disgraced into the morning.

—David Wagoner

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On motel walls

Beyond the foot of the bed: a seascape whose ocean,
Under the pummelling of a moon the shape and shade
Of a wrecking ball, is breaking into slabs
Against a concrete coast. Next to the closet:
A landscape of pasty mountains no one could climb
Or fall from, beyond whose sugary grandeur
Lies Flatland, a blankness plastered on plasterboard.
And over the bed: a garden in the glare
Of shadowless noon where flowerheads burst more briefly
And emptily and finally than fireworks.

For hours, I've been a castaway on that shore
By that fake water where nothing was ever born,
Where the goddess of beauty sank. I've flopped on those slopes
Where no one on earth could catch a breath worth breathing,
And I've been caught in that garden
Where the light is neither waves nor particles
But an inorganic splatter without a source.

Tonight, what's in the eye of this beholder
Is less and less and all the ways I can go
Wrong myself through the quick passing
Of sentences: tomorrow, I may be staring
Straight in the face of the hanging judge of my future
Who'll read me with the deadpan of a jailer
Before a search, a lock-down, and lights out.
I'll do hard time all night inside these walls
In my mind's eye, a transient facing a door
That says, *Have you forgotten anything*
Of value? Have you left anything behind?

—*David Wagoner*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Music

The case of Ivo Pogorelich

by Samuel Lipman

The young Yugoslavian pianist Ivo Pogorelich, born in 1958, has been a stormy petrel on the international music scene since his *succès de scandale* at the 1980 Chopin contest in Warsaw. There, though he didn't win a top prize, his playing split the jury and galvanized the audience. His musical approach was peculiar, his personal behavior unpredictable, and his dress more that of a pop star than of a serious musician. All the elements for performing success seemed present, though for those who still take great music as art rather than show business, one question remained: Could the boy play?

Though Pogorelich's American concerts prior to the present season had been inconclusive, the recordings necessary to evaluate his playing have not been long in coming. The earliest recording was a Vox Cum Laude LP[1] of works—chief among them, the Prokofiev Sixth Sonata— recorded in Zagreb sometime before 1978 (the record jacket is vague on the subject). Here the playing was that of an immensely gifted young pianist. The Prokofiev performance in particular was an almost ideal projection of this work's combination of resolute energy and cold, hard-edged charm; and *Bruyères,* the fifth Prelude from Book II of Debussy's *Preludes,* was quite hypnotizing in its unruffled, bell-like clarity.

Fittingly enough, given Pogorelich's initial success at the Chopin contest, his first commercial recording in the West was devoted to the works of Chopin.[2] One side of this record was devoted to several smaller pieces, including the C-sharp minor Scherzo, three Etudes, a Nocturne, and the last Prelude, in C-sharp minor. The other side was taken up with the Sonata in B-flat minor, the work which includes the famous Funeral March. Pogorelich's playing in the Sonata was mannered, quirky in the first movement without being convincing, heavy in the Scherzo, lachrymose in the Funeral March, and altogether too materialistic in the brief fourth movement, so well described by the composer and great pianist Anton Rubinstein as "night winds sweeping over churchyard graves." Of the smaller pieces, only the Prelude seemed to convey an arresting romantic sensibility, and even here a certain self-conscious waywardness seemed always on the point of intruding.

In 1982, Deutsche Grammophon issued the first examples of Pogorelich's playing of the standard German classical repertory. Juxtaposing the Beethoven Sonata in C minor, opus 111, and the Schumann Symphonic Etudes, this digital recording[3] demonstrated that Pogorelich wasn't—at least as yet—a full participant in the communication of music whose glory lies in its structure

1 Vox Cum Laude VCL 9049: this recording was pressed under license from the Yugoslav recording monopoly Jugoton.

2 Deutsche Grammophon 2531 346.

3 Deutsche Grammophon 2532 036.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rather than in its decoration. The Beethoven performance combined a plodding rhythm with a pervasive lightness. This lightness was all too plainly the result of intellectual incomprehension rather than superfluous digital virtuosity. It was all enough to make one long for the arrogant rigor of a truly German didactic performance, of the kind one used to hear from the academic pianists who taught in the provincial *Hochschulen* and who, in the early days of the LP, used to record for the smaller American record companies. Pogorelich's Schumann Etudes suffered from the disfiguring errors so common when a "romantic" pianist faces notated rhythmic complexity. Fortunately, there was more in Pogorelich's Schumann playing than inexactitude; his piano tone in these Etudes was unfailingly beautiful and marked by full-blooded chords played with ringing tops.

More recently, a disc appeared containing the Prokofiev Sixth Sonata again and that remarkable late document of French virtuoso piano writing, Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit.*[4] The Prokofiev was altogether more cautious than the Yugoslav performance. Whereas Pogorelich's first performance of the Sonata had correctly emphasized the work's strength, the newer one seemed to look for all too successfully hidden meaning, as if Prokofiev were best approached as an old master rather than a grown-up *enfant terrible.* The Ravel performance was a brilliant technical *tour de force,* but Pogorelich showed no sign—again, it must be emphasized, as yet—of being able to merge his marvelously played individual notes into the shimmering impasto of sound that *Gaspard de la Nuit* requires, because of both its poetic conception and its musical construction.

Pogorelich's newest recording returns to Chopin, presenting the Second Concerto (with the collaboration of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra conducted by Claudio Abbado) and the Polonaise in F-sharp minor, opus 44.[5] The Concerto, though enlivened by some marvelously idiosyncratic ideas, is marred by hard piano tone,[6] a failing especially disquieting in a work so redolent of intimacy and gentle seductiveness. Pogorelich plays the work's many decorous and filigreed passages with a disjunct application of force, although a purling *legato* would have been better suited to making musical sense out of what is otherwise merely exercise material. The Polonaise performance is indeed an impressive piece of playing, particularly if one is satisfied with a rendition in which the pianist (in the words of the *Gramophone*'s reviewer, J.O.C.) is "firebrand enough to have held back, single-handed, an entire army of Russian invaders from Chopin's homeland." Some listeners, with memories of Arthur Rubinstein's 1930 recording of this and the other Polonaises,[7] will find elegance and taste a necessary ingredient of musical heroism. Merely to compare Pogorelich's flat and Rubinstein's soulful playing of the central Mazurka section in the F-sharp Polonaise is to appreciate how much less interesting Chopin performances are today than they were fifty years ago.

As valuable as recordings may be, live concerts still represent the ultimate test not just for a player's technique and musicianship but for his ability to communicate the music to an audience. Given the publicity surrounding Pogorelich's initial success, and given the amount of interest that his several recordings have aroused, a palpable air of excitement attached to the pianist's two New York appearances in April at Carnegie Hall.

On this occasion, the public relations tom-toms were sounding no less loudly than they have throughout Pogorelich's short

4 Deutsche Grammophon 2532 093.

5 Deutsche Grammophon 410 507-1.

6 That the fault for this ugly piano quality does not lie with the recording itself is suggested by the fact that a radio broadcast from Chicago made presumably around the time of the recording was marked by an even spikier sound.

7 Formerly available only as an EMI import, these performances have now been released in the United States as Seraphim 1B-6131.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

career. *Vogue* magazine, for example, published in its April issue (above the name of Eugenia Zukerman, the violinist's wife and herself a flutist managed by ICM Artists Ltd., Pogorelich's American manager) a two-column blurb presenting the pianist as a cross between Mick Jagger and Artur Schnabel:

> In rock-star gear or in tails, Pogorelich is mesmerizing. He has it all: dazzling technique, resplendent tonal colors, a dynamic range that moves eerily from fire-breathing fortissimo to the most unearthly pianissimo. Critics have quibbled over his use of this extraordinary technical equipment, but the pianist himself is thoughtful, precise, and self-questioning about his own interpretations.

And *Vogue* went on to portray the pianist's personal life as an upbeat example of *la vie de bohème* as it is lived today:

> It is the Russian pianist Alice Kezeradze whom he credits as his greatest influence.
>
> "I will do it all the same!" Pogorelich yelled at her when she declined his offer of marriage. He was eighteen, she some fourteen years older, and married, and the mother of a small boy. But her pupil persisted, and since 1980 they have been man and wife, teacher and pupil, partners in his expanding career.

All the musical and personal elements must have come together at the box office, for Pogorelich's solo recital at Carnegie on April 12 was sold out; to accommodate the overflow it was necessary to sell stage seats. As announced, the program was to have begun with the Bach English Suite in A minor. Pogorelich began, however, with the Mozart Sonata in A major, K. 331. In the opening movement, a set of variations, Pogorelich disregarded the marking of *Andante grazioso* and instead played the theme in a tuberose manner, as if Mozart had written a regretful commentary on the melancholy nature of beauty. As Mozart playing, what Pogorelich did was in execrable taste; viewed as an eccentric idea, it was full of promise, at least as an antidote to the dullness so characteristic of piano playing today. Sad to say, Pogorelich dropped his hothouse conception of the theme as soon as he had promulgated it, and never returned to it again in the course of what proved to be a lackadaisically disjointed and uneven performance. Even the closing Rondo *alla turca,* so beloved of untalented piano students and their teachers, sounded pretentious and clattering. It must be said that the piano Pogorelich played—a German Steinway procured for the concert not through the firm's New York headquarters but through the services of ProPiano, an independent piano rental agency—sounded harsh and choked, as if it had only a limited amount of sound to give, and was mightily resentful of any attempt to get it to give more.

The next work on the program was the Chopin B minor Sonata. A longer, technically more flashy, and structurally more orthodox work than the B-flat minor Sonata Pogorelich had recorded, this composition offers immense rewards to pianists capable of negotiating Chopin's difficult keyboard writing. There can be no doubt that Pogorelich is so capable, and thus it came as something of a surprise that under his fingers the work had so little effect. Part of the problem was the pianist's tendency to moon over local beauties in the lyrical sections. The pace of the long slow movement was so clotted that time not only seemed to stand still, it seemed to go backward. More important in contributing to the general sense of ennui was the fact that Pogorelich's fingers, though strong enough to play all the right notes (often at blinding speed) are always not strong enough to articulate the notes musically, and to make, in the midst of swirling complications, subtle or marked distinctions in pulse, phrasing, and color. The result, in this Chopin performance, was a kind of sonic wallpaper—pretty to behold but lacking any individual design.

The Prokofiev Sixth Sonata closed the concert. Pogorelich's playing of it, though familiar from his recordings, seemed to demonstrate again a desire to replace the exuberance of his fingers with the labors of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his mind. The performance sounded distant, a little blurred, and very contrived; climaxes were either telegraphed or suppressed altogether. The result of this traversal of the Sonata, by substituting cerebration for energy, did more than just sell Prokofiev short. By the pianist's self-denial of his own youthful gifts, it presented him as a vastly less exciting performer than it is my impression he can be. In fairness, it must be mentioned that opinions about this recital other than mine abounded. Donal Henahan, for example, wrote in *The New York Times*:

> *Mr. Pogorelich vaguely reminded me all evening of another pianist, but it was not until the Prokofiev that I realized who it was. The young Van Cliburn played just this way: rhapsodically and expansively, and always with a Russian flavor, no matter who the composer.*

One wonders whether Pogorelich will appreciate the compliment.

Pogorelich returned to Carnegie Hall on April 25, this time to play the Tchaikowsky First Concerto with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under the leadership of its music director, Seiji Ozawa. The Tchaikowsky remains a severe test for any pianist. Technically, it is perhaps the most difficult work in the standard repertory; it is a piece which sounds unfailingly pianistic precisely because it is overall clumsy and ungainly, thereby prodding the pianist to maximum effort and concentration. Musically, it challenges any artist's ability to master both its many different (and often subtle) moods and a large and boisterous orchestra without obtrusive accentuation and simple banging. Significantly, Vladimir Horowitz, though the foremost living exponent of the concerto, has not been willing to play it since his return, in 1978, to playing with orchestras, preferring to concentrate instead on the more grateful, because more artfully written for the instrument, Rachmaninoff Third Concerto.

Whereas Cliburn, playing gently and cautiously, had met the challenge of this concerto by avoiding it, Pogorelich confronted it straight on. It was no help to him that Ozawa and the orchestra began the work's five-bar introduction with misleading accents off the beat; Ozawa's too-slow tempo, however, was doubtless the pianist's idea. When Pogorelich entered with the famous crashing d-flat major chords, his huge though still rounded sound (for this performance he used an American Steinway supplied by the Steinway firm itself) only served to outline the initially poor ensemble between piano and orchestra. The situation was righted after several bars had passed, but the overall impression conveyed by Pogorelich was that of an angrily deliberate elephant. He continued to play overwhelmingly loudly throughout much of the first section of the opening movement. Rather than enabling him to ride over the orchestra, Pogorelich's exertions only seemed to stimulate the orchestral players to a kind of desperate emulation. He was almost completely covered by the orchestra in the return of the famous opening theme.

This atmosphere of heroic but ultimately doomed competition with a superior foe marked Pogorelich's entire encounter this night, not just with the orchestra but also with Tchaikowsky. There were numerous examples of the kind of "fresh thinking" that involves rhythmic distortions, interruptions of pulse, and violations of the plain intent of the composer's markings. Wonderful octave playing went time and again for naught, either because the orchestra covered the pianist or because the pianist chose crazily fast tempos. Truly extraordinary playing by Pogorelich of the enormously taxing *Prestissimo* section of the slow movement hardly made an impression because he seemed so determined to do it at a quicker pace than anyone had ever managed before. Such lapses in piano playing can sometimes have—if the miscreant is as gifted as Pogorelich is—the character of delightful flights from reality. Unfortunately, Pogorelich's indulgences seemed all too thought out, and because of that they largely failed.

Nevertheless, to leave matters on such a negative note would be unfair to Pogorelich

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

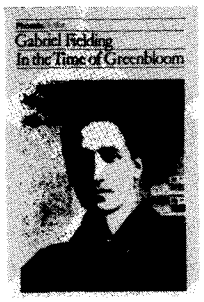
and to the present and future of the piano. I would prefer Pogorelich to make different use of his talents, to play more and think less, to indulge his fancies rather than his mental constructions. There is a danger that he will believe—and that he believes even now—the kind of arty drivel that is churned out about him in such venues as *Vogue*. But of course my preferences are irrelevant, and with any luck so will be the preferences of the audience that now comes to his concerts in the hope of finding the pianist's languid stage manner matched by piquant performances. Vastly more important than all these epiphenomena so carefully catalogued by critics and public is one simple fact about Ivo Pogorelich: he is a pianist whom one notices and about whom, for musical reasons, one cares. To be such at the age of twenty-five is rare enough; to be such in today's musical atmosphere of goody-goody smiles and humdrum recapitulation of the successes of the dead is almost unparalleled. One ought to keep one's fingers crossed for Pogorelich. He needs his in order to play.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Who is Gabriel Fielding?

Frances Taliaferro answered that query in the November, 1983 issue of *The New Criterion:* "He is an entirely civilized writer." Mr. Fielding is also one of the many distinguished authors whose work we are proud to present in the PhoenixFiction series. Here, he is in the company of such "civilized" writers as J. B. Priestley, J. I. M. Stewart (a.k.a. Michael Innes), and Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andric, to name just a few.

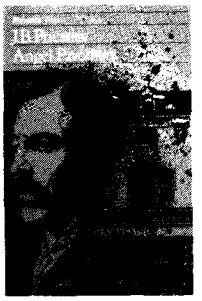
PhoenixFiction features splendid novels in an attractive, quality paperback format—books that deserve to be read and reread.



In the Time of Greenbloom
Gabriel Fielding
$8.95 416 pages

The Good Companions
J. B. Priestley
$9.95 648 pages

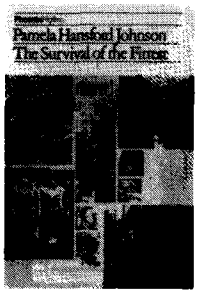
Bright Day
J. B. Priestley
$7.95 374 pages



Angel Pavement
J. B. Priestley
$8.95 502 pages

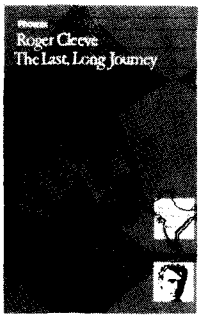
The Department
Gerald Warner Brace
$6.95 288 pages

A Use of Riches
J. I. M. Stewart
$6.95 248 pages

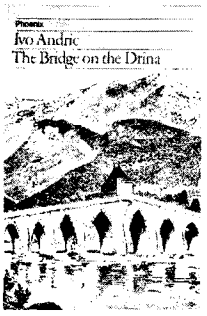


The Survival of the Fittest
Pamela Hansford Johnson
$8.95 416 pages

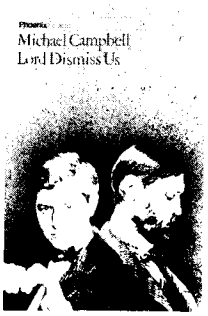
Solomon's Folly
Leslie Croxford
$6.95 208 pages



The Last, Long Journey
Roger Cleeve
$7.95 272 pages



The Bridge on the Drina
Ivo Andric
$8.95 318 pages



Lord Dismiss Us
Michael Campbell
$9.95 384 pages

Available at bookstores, or directly from

The University of Chicago Press 5801 South Ellis Avenue Chicago, IL 60637

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Theater

The greatest salesman of them all

by Mimi Kramer

A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory.
—Arthur Miller, in *Death of a Salesman*

He's a fake, and he doesn't know the territory!
—Meredith Willson, in *The Music Man*

You're gonna make something up, be sure it will help or keep your mouth closed.
—David Mamet, in *Glengarry Glen Ross*

The salesman, Uncle Charley reminds us, is first and foremost a spinner of dreams, a man who makes the world of illusions his special province.

Charley, Willy Loman's old friend and next-door neighbor (a sort of adopted "uncle" to Willy's boys), is the choric figure in *Death of a Salesman*; and when David Huddleston delivers the famous elegy over Willy's new-made grave toward the end of the current revival of *Salesman* there isn't a dry eye in the Broadhurst Theatre.

> Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine . . . .

It is a great speech—there's no doubt about it—establishing the salesman as a figure whose very existence bespeaks a kind of lonely bravery and whose only crime is daring to dream too far.

The New York stage has been fairly busy with salesmen this year and busy with plays that focus on the figure of the salesman as a spinner of dreams. Salesmen—lying salesmen in particular—are the subject of David Mamet's new play, *Glengarry Glen Ross,* which opened at the Golden Theater in March, shortly before the current revival of *Death of a Salesman* and in time to win a Pulitzer Prize at the beginning of April. *Glengarry Glen Ross* centers around four sleazy real-estate salesmen and moves between the dingy, two-bit office from which they make a living selling worthless land and the Chinese restaurant down the block, where they meet for lunch and sit around trying to cheat one another. Meanwhile, receiving less attention, a tight little production of *The Music Man* at the Equity Library Theater earlier this year resurrected the forgotten figure of another salesman: Professor Harold Hill, Meredith Willson's fast-talking, rabble-rousing con artist who manages to sell a nonexistent brass band, piece by piece, to a community of stolidly literal-minded Midwesterners.

Every salesman has his territory, but the territory changes. When Harold Hill rolls into prewar Iowa off the morning train he leaves a chorus of traveling salesmen behind lamenting the advent of a new era, in which "the Uneeda Biscuit in an air-tight, sanitary

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

package" had "made the cracker barrel obsolete," and "the Model-T Ford" had "changed the approach to the traveling salesman." By *Death of a Salesman* the automobile has become the *sine qua non* of the salesman's craft—like the chevalier's sword or the poet's pen. By the time we get to *Glengarry Glen Ross,* the salesman is no longer traveling; he works out of an office of sorts. But he still has a territory and he still has a car in which he goes after his mark, driving out to low-income housing estates in search of this or that soft touch. And he is still a spinner of dreams—his own and other people's. Whatever he sells and for whatever profit, the salesman's virtue resides in his knowledge that ultimately he has nothing to sell but himself and the image of his own integrity.

Presumably it is his willingness to carry on in the face of this fact that makes the salesman, in Charley's speech at the end of *Death of a Salesman,* a figure of nobility. Charley reminds us that for the salesman there is no security, no foundation except his arch supports and the woman who waits for him to come home. Wherefore, says Charley, we are to honor the man who departs from us in his little car with his sample cases and we are to mourn him when his imagination carries him finally to horizons too distant for even our conception to follow. "Nobody dast blame this man" because a salesman "is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory."

Why a middle-aged, city-dwelling businessman who has been speaking fairly normally all evening should suddenly, three minutes before curtain-fall, lapse into an unfamiliar rustic dialect is a question that has never, I feel, received sufficient attention. That it did not seem to bother me or anyone else in the balcony of the Broadhurst that evening is certainly a credit to David Huddleston's performance as Charley. It is also a testament to the willingness to be fooled with which most of us enter a theater. In the darkness of the theater we do not squirm impatiently and think, "'Dast?' Why *dast*? What would have been wrong with *can* or *should*? Nobody *can* blame this man. A salesman *has* got to dream." In a darkened theater it does not seem to matter—when we hear that "attention must be paid" to this man—that no one ever encountered such an inflection outside a New York taxi (FARE MUST BE PAID BEFORE LEAVING CAB). We go to the theater willing to be deceived in the interests of being moved.

This willingness may go a long way toward explaining what makes Arthur Miller the damp rag on the broad middle brow of American theater, soothing our febrile longing for some authentic literary voice to call our own. For in a darkened theater it does not occur to one that the diction of Charley's spoken epitaph is the least of its incongruities. One does not tend to notice how little Charley's picture of the salesman has to do with the actual hero of Miller's play.

Currently undergoing its second round of revisionist criticism, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and its relative claims to literary greatness ought to be a very dead issue by now. Where the few early critics of the play attacked *Salesman* on so-called Aristotelian grounds, sifting through theories of tragedy for points on which to fault it (the subject matter, the quality of language, the nature of the hero), later critics have found more intriguing reasons. Beginning with Mary McCarthy, who drew attention to the almost crippling anonymity of Miller's hero (". . . he is a Human Being without being anyone at all, a sort of suffering Statistic"), a number of critics have managed to argue persuasively that, even granting the notion that it would be possible to write a "tragedy of the common man," *Death of a Salesman* is not it. In view of the compelling nature of some of the criticisms made in the last twenty years by (among others) Richard Gilman, Robert Brustein, Stanley Kauffmann, and John Simon, it is surprising to find in the recent *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Death of a Salesman: A Collection of Critical Essays,* published last year by Prentice-Hall, neither a single article questioning

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the merits of Miller's play nor a single word addressed to the arguments of this decidedly undoctrinaire school of thought. Critical fashion—especially in the academy—would appear to have swung back in favor of Miller's greatness.

"Death of a Salesman," writes Helene Wickham Koon, the editor of this volume, "takes on the high seriousness of Greek tragedy."

> Structurally, it is as taut as *Oedipus*; there are no digressions, and Willy Loman marches inexorably from his entering, "It's all right. I came back," to his doom. Given the circumstances, he cannot behave other than as he does. Even the manner of his death follows the classic pattern of keeping violence offstage, while the "Requiem" section functions in the manner of a Greek chorus. Miller developed the choral aspect more completely in *A View From the Bridge,* and in both plays it serves the same purpose as in classic drama . . . .

I sometimes think that academicians should be forced to attend the Broadway revivals of some of the masterpieces whose praises they sing. The choric figure in *A View from the Bridge*—the lawyer who addresses the audience at the beginning and end of the play—serves no purpose at all beyond that of adding a further element of preciousness to an already self-conscious piece of work, and last year's revival of the play would have been especially instructive for anyone inclined to take Miller seriously as a tragic poet.

The Dustin Hoffman revival of *Death of a Salesman* is similarly revealing. Like last year's production of *A View from the Bridge,* it offers an evening of unrelieved tedium in the theater. But *Salesman* (alone of Arthur Miller's plays) has at least the merit of being theatrical: it plays better than it reads. Because roughly half the action takes place in Willy Loman's mind, the stage is occupied by two spaces in time: a particular day in the present, when Willy's son Biff has come home for an ill-fated visit, and a series of days in the past, which intrude on Willy's thoughts whatever he happens to be doing. As a result of the two time periods, our interest lies not only in finding out what will happen with Willy's present domestic and financial problems, but also in discovering what crisis in the past has resulted in his estrangement from his son. "He threw me out of the house," Biff reminds his mother at one point, about which she wonders musingly, "Why did he do that? I never knew why."

The answer, of course, has to do with a woman: the woman with whom Biff, at seventeen, discovered his father in a hotel room in Boston, where he had gone to ask Willy's advice at a crucial moment in his life. Now, it is truly hard to believe that Linda Loman would never before have wondered why her husband turned her oldest son out of the house, or that Biff would have turned into a homosexual and kleptomaniac because, late in adolescence, he found his father *flagrante delicto.* But the dual time element in *Death of a Salesman* is structurally such a clever device that one hardly notices, and Miller handles it impressively, linking and juxtaposing past and present with artful care. Nevertheless, a clever play is only a clever play: presumably a work of literature is something more. What this year's revival suggests, more than anything else, is that the biggest flaw in the play is the lie at the center of it.

What it all really comes down to is Arthur Miller's own attitude toward Willy Loman; for whatever other stipulations we can or cannot make, there is one thing, surely, that can reasonably be asked of a play that presents itself as a tragedy: that its hero be someone whom the playwright loves, someone whose existence has some value and whose death will constitute some loss, not necessarily to the world (forget about the world for a moment), but to the playwright, who after all is asking us to love his hero and mourn his passing. It was, in fact, specifically in order to prove to the world that a character like Willy Loman could be of tragic value that Miller ostensibly wrote

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Salesman, and the world had no trouble being convinced. As Helen Dudar's feature article in *The New York Times* reminded us, "'Strong men wept'" was "the hallmark of the [original] Kazan and later productions."

> If they did not cry for themselves, they shed tears for some flawed, victimized familiar—father, brother, friend—replicated by Willy. Not long ago in a magazine interview, John Huston recalled the impact of that performance with professional envy: "I'll never forget it . . . I looked around me once, and people had slipped off their seats and were kneeling, they were on their knees crying . . . ."

No, the world had no trouble being convinced. But even those critics who found it impossible to love Willy Loman themselves seemed to accept the fact that Arthur Miller did. The extraordinary thing about the 1984 revival of *Death of a Salesman* was that it made it almost impossible for me to go on believing that Arthur Miller had ever had any sympathy for Willy Loman. In fact, I left the Broadhurst feeling that, far from loving his salesman, Miller did not even like him.

This impression was enhanced, in part, by two highly revealing, idiosyncratic performances (from John Malkovich as Biff and Stephen Lang as the younger son, Happy). But it was largely, I think, the result of the passage of time. In 1949, it would have been possible to see Willy Loman as a decent, well-meaning human being, to watch him all evening and listen to him speak and to leave the theater feeling that he was essentially a good man. But ideas, like traveling salesmen, have a way of changing. Since 1949 certain liberal attitudes—toward aggression, ambition, and competitiveness—have moved from the periphery of our culture to its center, so that the views of the average middle-class Broadway audience are now actually in harmony with what I take to have been Miller's views all along. In 1949 it might have been possible to view Willy as only the victim of a big, bad commercial system. In 1984, it is impossible not to see Miller's own distaste for all Willy's attitudes and petit bourgeois concerns, impossible not to come away from the play feeling that Miller's real judgment of his hero is that he has no soul.

Because Willy's children are the focus of his attention—what he talks and thinks about most—we get to know Willy fairly well by watching him with his sons and learning of the desires and hopes he has for them. Consequently, a large part of our picture of Willy is formed from a judgment of how he tries to raise his boys. In 1949, Willy Loman would have seemed like a good father, teaching Biff and Happy the work ethic and a healthy respect for their mother ("Since when do you let your mother carry wash up the stairs?"). Encouraging Biff to be a football hero and a bit of a cad, he would have been teaching him to be no more than a normal, healthy American boy. But notions of child-rearing, like notions of manhood, have altered since 1949 and an audience today worriedly shakes its head at most of the things that Willy gives his boys. He gives them a punching bag and a lot of sinister notions: that it's "anaemic" to do well in school, that it's all right to cheat on tests, that "initiative" is a good thing to show (whether by stealing a football from the locker room or by scoring a touchdown "for Pop" when you're "supposed to pass"), that women should be treated condescendingly:

> Just wanna be careful with those girls, Biff, that's all. Don't make any promises. No promises of any kind. Because a girl, y'know, they always believe what you tell 'em.

With advice like that, is it any wonder that Biff's way with women used to worry his mother? "He's too rough with the girls," she complains to Willy on one of those days in the past. But, thanks to Willy's negative example, Biff isn't rough with the girls anymore. He cares about women. Really cares. He touches his mother's hair: "Your hair . . . Your hair got so gray," he says softly to the woman Willy is continually silencing:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> LINDA: Oliver always thought the highest of him—
> WILLY: Will you let me talk?
> BIFF: Don't yell at her, Pop, will ya?

As John Malkovich slumps around the stage with the pigeon-toed walk of the Confused Adolescent, it is easy to feel that we have seen him many times before, in *Rebel Without a Cause,* for instance, or, more to the point, in *The Graduate.* Unfortunately, while Malkovich is playing Dustin Hoffman, Dustin Hoffman is playing Willy Loman, and it is impossible not to hear, every time Willy opens his mouth, the voice of the character in *The Graduate* who keeps shaking his finger at the hero and saying, "Plastics!"

That plastics are the key factor in Willy Loman's personality is the strongest impression left by this production of *Salesman*; that and the fact that Arthur Miller really thought so all along. Why should we mourn for Willy Loman? Because he comes on stage muttering, "I have such thoughts. I have such strange thoughts"? What do those thoughts consist of? A few memories, a conviction that "America is full of beautiful towns and fine, upstanding people," and a touching faith in advertising and the installment plan. The thought of his old Chevrolet, which had eighty-two thousand miles on it when he turned it in, leaves him in a heightened state comparable to that of Lear on the heath. Where in all this is the picture of a man whom Arthur Miller could have any admiration, any sympathy for?

Indeed, in 1984 the real hero of the piece seems to be Biff, the boy who doesn't know if there is "any future for him" because he doesn't "know what the future is" or what it is that he's "supposed to want." An audience in 1949 would have had good reason to worry about Biff Loman, who can't seem to hold down a job any more than he can generate an interest in girls. He would have seemed a tortured soul, failing in his duties according to the notions of manhood and adulthood that would have been expected of a red-blooded American male. But notions of what the adult American male should or shouldn't be able to do have also changed and in 1984 an audience is far more troubled by Biff's brother, Happy. We shudder at Happy's grasping aggressivity, snatching after women and success—Happy is very much his father's son—so that when we hear that Biff "can't take hold" we are unperturbed. And when we hear Willy say things like, "I'll get him [Biff] a job selling. He could be big in no time," a sort of cosmic wave from the audience sends back the answer: "Ha! Biff Loman is too good for your petty world of commodities—so hands off!"

Biff Loman "can't take hold of some kind of a life." But we love Biff because he can't take hold. We love him because he used to do "some damn fool thing like whistling whole songs in the elevator," and because he says, "Screw the business world!" Biff doesn't care what anybody thinks because

> we don't belong in this nut house of a city! We should be mixing cement on some open plain or—or carpenters. A carpenter is allowed to whistle!

Oh, to be a whistling carpenter! "You're a poet, you know that, Biff?" Happy tells him earlier; and he's right, Biff Loman is a poet. He sees that "always to have to get ahead of the next fella" is "a measly manner of existence":

> To get on that subway on the hot mornings in summer. To devote your whole life to keeping stock, or making phone calls, or selling or buying. To suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation, when all you really desire is to be outdoors with your shirt off.

Biff Loman is the man who wants no more out of life than to remove his shirt, and audiences in 1984 adore him, appealing as he does to that part in all of us that wants to tear off our shirts and run whistling through the foliage, a hammer in one hand and a plumb line in the other. Miller's genius here

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lies in his ability to capitalize on an idea, in the extraordinary shrewdness with which he managed to assess the market value of the Shirtless Hero and to guess how far it would go.

For how could Arthur Miller have known, way back in 1949, that Biff Loman would turn out to be the hero of the Eighties?

> Hap, I've had twenty or thirty different kinds of jobs since I left home before the war, and it always turns out the same. I just realized it lately. In Nebraska when I herded cattle, and the Dakotas, and Arizona, and now in Texas. It's why I came home now, I guess, because I realized it. This farm I work on, it's spring there now, see? And they've got about fifteen new colts. There's nothing more inspiring or—beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt . . . .

Biff Loman is the kind of guy who herds cattle out in Nebraska and who *realizes* things herding cattle: the intellectual cowboy. He's a family man *au fond*—not after the petit bourgeois fashion of a Willy Loman. A Sam Shepard-type family man: the sort of fellow to whom no sight is "more inspiring or—beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt." Biff feels a call of some kind when the foaling season starts, when spring comes to where he is, and that's when he comes home; whereas Willy comes home at the beginning of the play because he "nearly hit a kid in Yonkers."

But that pretty much sums up Arthur Miller's true position on Willy Loman: what he really feels about his salesman and his Chevrolet is that they are dangerous to children.

If it was once reasonable to suppose that Miller felt with Linda that Willy Loman was the sort of man to whom "attention must be paid"—that, like Charley, he judged that "Nobody dast blame this man"—it is no longer. Charley's speech at the end of the current revival of *Death of a Salesman* is the most elaborate display of false sympathy in English letters. Really, Miss Havisham's relations, clustering around and waiting for her to die, have nothing on Arthur Miller. For Willy Loman has no dreams—beyond the dream of a comfortable, safe life and a happy family—and that is precisely Miller's quarrel with him. It is Biff whom Arthur Miller admires and Biff with whose epitaph Miller really agrees: "He had the wrong dreams. All, all wrong."

Of the other salesmen on the New York stage this year, none is paid as short shrift as Willy Loman. He is a character easily taken advantage of, and both Arthur Miller and Dustin Hoffman take him for anything they can get. Hoffman's performance is impressive to a degree: he shuffles beautifully. But I don't see the virtue in a performance that, every five minutes, inspires the mental comment, "Gee, doesn't Dustin Hoffman seem just like a sixty-year-old man? Sixty-two, even!" Acting, *good* acting, is supposed to make you forget that there is even an actor there, that the person you see is not who he pretends to be. What Hoffman does isn't acting: it's just showing off. Acting is what Joe Mantegna, Robert Prosky, and James Tolkan do in *Glengarry Glen Ross,* inhabiting the skin of another person so idiosyncratic and specific that he cannot be confused with anyone else. Hoffman's Willy Loman, like Miller's, is just an Old Man, any Old Man: yours, mine, Dustin's, Arthur's. Where the exquisite performances of Mantegna, Prosky, and Tolkan are each in the service of a character, Hoffman's performance seems to be only in the service of himself.

Poor Willy! Between actor and playwright, he doesn't stand a chance. No one is meant to approve of Prof. Harold Hill or of the hustling low-lifes in David Mamet's play, but they are afforded a kind of heroism: we are meant to admire them because they are so good at what they do. They also have an ethic: if one is going to lie, one ought to lie well. "You're gonna make something up," says one of Mamet's salesmen in a supreme moment of moral ascendancy to a character who has just bungled a sale by lying inopportunely, "be sure it will help or keep your

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mouth closed." The salesman who says this is heading for a fall in the play, but for that moment he has been allowed to voice his salesman's ethos in a manner that commands our attention and respect. Arthur Miller does not give his hero any reason to command our attention. But he gets an awful lot of mileage out of having someone beg for it.

There is an age-old alliance between playwrights and liars. The stage-liar is a sort of magician who, whether hero or villain, whether Cyrano or Tartuffe, creates something out of nothing. Both David Mamet's audience and Meredith Willson's are given an opportunity to identify with the figure of the salesman, who builds his hopes on dreams. The salesmen have tricks played on them by their creators: David Mamet's consummate liar makes one speech too many and the cynical salesman of *The Music Man,* deceived into thinking that the piano-teacher/librarian is more interesting than she is (a "sadder but wiser girl"), gets roped into idealism. But the nastiest trick of all is Miller's: he does not even make Willy good at what he does. Where the salesmen of Mamet and Willson tell lies that bring them glory, the salesman of Miller lies in order to cover up his inadequacies. But that is because Miller's art, like Hoffman's acting, is really in the service of the self. Miller wants us to see how contemptible Willy is: for the greater Willy's inadequacies, the more credit Miller gets for forgiving them.

Of course theater, like selling, is really all about making something out of nothing. The Equity Library Theater makes something out of nothing all the time as, year in and year out, with scarcely any money at all, it manages to stage delightful revivals of plays that sorely need to be revived. And the audiences who attend these productions—with makeshift costumes and sets and actors who charmingly never quite look the part—learn the lesson of the townspeople at the end of *The Music Man*: that whatever the kids are playing, one will tend to hear Mozart's Minuet in G if one expects to hear it. David Mamet, in *Glengarry Glen Ross,* also manages to make something out of nothing, for the ludicrously inarticulate non-language that the salesmen speak becomes, by the end of a short evening of theater, a surprisingly eloquent mode of expression, however lacking it may seem to be in actual words.

Arthur Miller also creates something out of nothing in *Death of a Salesman.* But there is a significant difference between casting illusions in order to make a point about deception and casting illusions in order to deceive. For thirty-five years Miller has managed to fool Broadway audiences into thinking that he sees the salesman as a dreamer, a man to whom attention must be paid. In this he demonstrates a closer kinship to the characters of David Mamet and Meredith Willson than to the playwrights themselves. He may, in fact, turn out to be the greatest salesman of them all.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art

The art inside the book

by Creighton Gilbert

All exhibitions of illuminated manuscripts are a good thing, for the obvious and yet important reason that there are virtually no permanent displays of them: their owners keep them in protective darkness ninety-nine percent of the time, like prints and drawings. One spectacular exception is the British Museum. For fifty years or more, its visitors have been able to look at a full collection of great works, including such masterpieces as the *Register of New Minister,* the greatest of Anglo-Saxon pictures. Why this openness has not been the subject of conservators' complaints (and what it says about the validity of their complaints elsewhere) is a mystery. One explanation might be that, alone of the world's great art institutions, the British Museum has been a library as much as a museum and that, as a result, a feeling arose that the library's books should blend into the museum's visual display.

The common invisibility of illuminated manuscripts means that different kinds of people, as well as fewer, are aware of them. Among the millions who wander through the Metropolitan Museum every year, there are a certain number whose responses turn into critical essays. These essays often show a combination of amateurishness and speculative vigor that helps give works of art a continuing afterlife, even if part of that afterlife comes from the efforts of professionals to stamp out what they find to be utter nonsense. Manuscripts, however, are almost solely the concern of professionals. Thus they stand, together with prints and drawings, at the center of an odd little subculture, with its own little magazines for shop talk; moreover, the writing about them is often marked by a fine precision, but also by an unimaginative prissiness, that is strongly reminiscent of the writing in stamp collectors' journals.

Some attempt to break out of this restrictive atmosphere has been made by the "museum without walls." We now have, in addition to deluxe facsimiles of a few manuscripts (in a few expensive copies), decent mass-produced equivalents of many great works. Reproductions of this sort got their greatest push from a wonderful example, the facsimile of the *Book of Hours of Queen Jeanne d'Évreux* at the Cloisters. This was a very small book with not much color, and it could be sold at the museum shop—all of which made the project practical. Since then George Braziller has earned much gratitude by issuing a dozen or so more such books. Their texts have been largely confined to the usual limited professional facts and their range to the late Middle Ages, whose naturalistic style looks familiar. When, in a few cases, the series included other works, these were from as late as the Renaissance, the age when books started to be printed and manuscripts became rare luxurious toys, like hand-built automobiles today. Now that this series has dried up, for various reasons (including exhaustion of the best examples), one wonders whether the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wild imagery of the Romanesque and other superb medieval painting, practically unknown to a wider public, might benefit from a similar presentation.

The British Museum was the chief lender to a recent exhibition at the Morgan Library entitled "Renaissance Paintings in Manuscripts,"[1] to which the Morgan was able to add its own examples, including the *Farnese Book of Hours,* the best of such virtuoso toys. While easy to take, the exhibition was generally greeted as a strange novelty. The reviewers' standard reaction was to say that the subject had a special interest because we always supposed that the art of manuscript painting disappeared after the Middle Ages. But to judge from the observations that usually follow, it's a discovery in the same sense that the art of the nineteenth-century academy is a discovery: we knew very well it was there; we just passed it by as second-rate. Now, thanks no doubt in part to an exhibition calendar hungry for new themes, we have a chance to look again.

In the Renaissance, the formula goes, the great craft-based arts of the Middle Ages declined as the modern fine arts ascended; painters found their vehicle not in small illustrations but in large-scale pictures. Now, the second statement is generally true, but not the first. While stained glass and mosaic and ivory did indeed cease to be major vehicles of European culture, new craft media emerged in the Renaissance that the Middle Ages had never developed: the bronze medal, ceramics in the form of majolica, the glass of Venice. Most important of all were the products of the printer's craft, a category that includes engraving and woodcut.

The idea that painting became the preserve of the easel picture or something larger may explain why, in seeking to point to this exhibition's major monuments, reviewers drew from it chiefly the few images that can be handled as quasi-easel paintings. This happened on the cover of the leaflet offered to the Morgan's visitors, where we see what looks like a picture in a gold frame, and again on the back with its Fouquet. It happened, too, in *The New York Times Magazine,* where the feature illustration accompanying an article on the exhibition was a scene of the shepherds adoring the Christ Child with Mary, by Amico Aspertini. Aspertini was a wonderful, quirky artist and it's nice to see him get some attention, but too bad it had to come this way. (He is omitted from survey textbooks chiefly, I would guess, because he was not from Florence or Tuscany.) Aspertini admired the bizarre variations on ancient Roman ornament created by the Florentine Filippino Lippi, but, perhaps because he was from northern Italy, he filtered out Filippino's cutting mannerism with a casual freshness of airy light. He tried many media, but his only known manuscript illuminations are in the book shown in the Morgan exhibition (one other group is perhaps also by him). Since they are blank on the back, we can surmise that they were probably inserted in the volume rather than being integral to it. The *Times* startlingly enhanced the scene's painting-like qualities by blowing up the central area and bleeding it to the edge of the page at about nine times the area of the original. (The exhibition catalogue shows it near to its actual size.) When the exhibition is seen in this way, it seems to be saying: true, in the Renaissance the art of illuminating didn't do much, but at least by exploring we can add a few examples to our lists of works by the painters of the period. That is not the best way of looking at it.

1 "Renaissance Painting in Manuscripts: Treasures from the British Library" opened at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California (October 6, 1983-January 8, 1984) and then moved to the Morgan Library in New York (January 20-April 29). It will be seen at the British Library from May 25 through September 30. The exhibition was organized by Thomas Kren, associate curator of paintings at the J. Paul Getty Museum, and William Voelkle, curator of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts at the British Library. The catalogue, *Renaissance Painting in Manuscripts: Treasures from the British Library,* was published by Hudson Hills Press: 210 pages, $50 hardback, $18 paper.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In fact, the exhibition at the Morgan had much more to offer, in its own quiet way. Its division into three nationalities—Flemish, French, and Italian—was inevitable and evocative. The opening date of 1450, after all, is just after the International Gothic age ended and the regions of Europe asserted their local stylistic languages more firmly than ever. The stylistic traits of each of these groups were pointed out nicely in the exhibition's accompanying leaflet, but something more may emerge when one asks of each group the same question: How do Renaissance illuminators confront the disappearance of manuscript painting as a vehicle for artists?

The Flemish took the simplest option: they really paid no attention, or almost none, continuing for at least two generations to work in a traditional way. A Flemish manuscript of 1490 can be distinguished from one of 1410 by the shifts of generational style, but that is the same way a manuscript of 1410 can be distinguished from one of 1330. The most famous stylistic innovation of these Flemish artists was in the living frames they painted. Of course, in various ways the living frame had been a tool of illuminators for centuries. With the Flemish—and this was well illustrated in the Morgan exhibition by the *Breviary of Queen Isabella*—it was used to create the illusion that the live objects placed on it push forward in space from the plane of the frame. Those objects involve us and make us wonder whether the equally illusionistic scene inside the frame is also only a picture. Earlier live frames had often evoked various kinds of comedy, but these do so with a witty distancing that makes the nature of art the theme of the joke. The reason for this may derive from the pressure on the very existence of the manuscript book, which had lost its standard function by that time. Like handweaving after the industrial revolution, the manuscript book had found a little niche as a conspicuous toy of the rich. In the process, both artist and patron became self-conscious about the medium and the medium became part of the theme and the image, like the carefully imperfect weave that we are supposed to observe in the most luxurious textiles.

In France, some artists showed a similar conservatism. But others, led by Fouquet, went to the opposite extreme: they embraced easel painting and filled books with examples of it. When Fouquet did this he turned an unlikely idea into a superb and distinctive art, where the virtuosity of tiny points of light and the architectonic strictness of orderly depth introduce us to a world view unlike anyone else's. It seems characteristic that the French artists are chiefly known by name, Fouquet being followed by Perréal, Colombe, Bourdichon. They are thus modern artists—of the Renaissance—as much as they are in style. When collectors cut pages out of their books and hang them on the wall, they may be committing a historical error, but they are not performing visual amputation. In a similar way, the exhibition catalogue reproduces these pictures on full pages, without their margins (some have lost them)—in exact opposition to the Flemish super-frames.

In Italy, where illumination never had the significance it had in other countries, a few painters copy the Flemish and a few, like Aspertini or Clovio in the *Farnese Hours,* give us small easel paintings. But there is also in Italy a distinct invention, one worth more looking at than it almost ever gets. This occurs in manuscripts where there are few pictures. They have borders that imitate older ones, and colored initials. But what they have especially is lettering. In this way, the whole book is the visual object, not just the images in it.

We understand this phenomenon in Islamic art, where we know about the prohibition of images and see flamboyant decorative calligraphy. We also understand it in Chinese manuscripts, although we rarely look at the scrolls that have lettering only. In both cases, we accept the works as abstract art, which is difficult to do with our own alphabet. When we read the words "Ave Maria," say, we have to learn to accept

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

actively that form and meaning are both present, even as they are present in a picture of the Madonna.

There are a few Western works of art made of readable words, of course, from a great example in the Morgan Library—a Byzantine book of gold words on a purple ground—to Shahn. But the Renaissance manuscripts are different from all other cases, including the Islamic, because we see their words not just on a page but inside a frame, which signals forcefully that the words are a visual composition—of a Western kind. The artist paints the words on an illusionistic field—a white plane hung by ribbons from an architectural frame behind it—so that perspective articulates the words as design. Thus, manuscripts are part of the Italian Renaissance's cult of the classical world: what the humanists who admired ancient Roman ruins liked most were inscriptions; they were epigraphers.

But these works are also critically connected to something else: the printed book, whose look is a creation of craftsmen in Renaissance Italy using the same ancient sources as the scribes of the manuscripts. Nothing basic has really happened to the best printing since the great creative decisions in Venice in the fifteenth century. Seen in this way, the Renaissance manuscript moves away from being a declining art and toward belonging to the continuum of the shapes before our eyes.

Editors' note: Readers are reminded that *The New Criterion* does not publish during July or August. This year, a special summer supplement will be mailed to subscribers on June 29 and will be available at newsstands. (For information, see page forty-three in this issue.) The next regular issue of *The New Criterion* will appear in September.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Spring exhibitions

by Eric Gibson

Of the exhibitions to be seen in New York this spring, one of the most memorable was Bill Jensen's at the Washburn Gallery. At least one critic complained because the show was divided into two parts—drawings downtown, paintings on Fifty-seventh Street—but the separation made sense. Jensen's notebook sketches would have been lost beside his paintings, and his paintings are best seen with lots of surrounding space.

Jensen uses drawing to clarify an idea when he gets stuck while working on a painting. Many of the drawings in the downtown gallery were dense, spiny images centered on a four-by-six sheet of paper with ample white space around them. This arrangement suggested a willed correspondence between the blankness of the page and the weightless space of thought: each fresh sheet affording him the opportunity for his ideas to expand freely, unfettered by previous association. The normal fate of such work is for it to be seen as secondary to the finished product. Yet the great virtue of this portion of the exhibition was that it re-created that moment when these drawings—fleeting images rapidly fixed—loomed as large in the artist's mind as the inchoate goal they guided him toward. It thus restored them to their place at the center of the creative process.

Jensen's paintings have a new fullness, and a greater precision—they speak with clearer voice. One can measure this by comparing the new paintings at the Washburn with his earlier work in the Whitney Museum's "Five Painters in New York" show this spring. For example, *The Family,* at the Whitney, shows a group of two-dimensional cones overlaid by a yellow lozenge stretching side-to-side across the surface. The motifs are centered and parallel to the picture plane, giving the painting a strong, iconic presence. Yet its dominant tone is one of reticence. It is a public painting unable to overcome its shyness. *Land's End,* at the Washburn, resembles *The Family.* It is horizontal, has the same side-to-side lozenge form, and at twenty by thirty-four inches is close to it in size. But it has shrugged off the reticence of its predecessor. Its forms are more ample and appear to be on the move: the winged carapace, fully three-dimensional, appears to be rising, as does the fatter lozenge behind. Where in *The Family* everything gathered toward the center and was held there, in *Land's End* everything points freely away, conveying aggressiveness and energy.

These qualities of amplitude and control are everywhere evident in the Washburn show. It is as though Jensen, having mastered his pictorial elements—reduced size, convoluted form-imagery, scraped and etched surfaces—could now fill them out and build them up. His formal vocabulary is now fully three-dimensional. Picture plane and edge are exploited creatively, in the first case in order to send a cornucopia-like form rocketing toward the viewer (or so the illusion

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

suggests) in *The Vanquished*; in the second, in order to crop a floating spiral form in *Diver's Ferry,* suggesting more interior space than we see. And the work as a whole is more richly textured.

One ought to make a point about Jensen's scale, since "small" merely oversimplifies. (*Land's End,* big for him, could be smuggled out of the gallery with ease.) He turns his back on the rhetoric of size while extracting its essential characteristics: its sense of publicness, its ability to absorb the viewer, its punch. At the same time, the smallness of his pictures suits his imagery, which is miniature, private, and near-hermetic. And it commands our attention. Big paintings we hardly notice anymore. But Jensen's small ones are like someone whispering: they make us come close and pay heed.

"Five Painters in New York" included, besides Jensen, John Torreano, Brad Davis, Elizabeth Murray, and Gary Stephan, all showing work of the last ten years. While it is hard to know what Torreano's glitzy pointillism or Davis's empty decorator confections were doing there, some of Stephan's pictures (particularly the broken, vertiginous spatiality of *Mental Value*) were quite good, and Murray's development in particular warrants our attention.

Murray's work is especially potent when it is entirely abstract, as it was from 1975 to 1980—so much so that one wonders what made her veer from so fruitful an avenue. In *Pink Spiral Leap* (1975), a pink spiral winds shakily around the perimeters of a dark gray field, highlighted by a few small squares. It is an image of delicate awkwardness and, for all its spareness, it has great feeling. Around 1980, Murray introduced recognizable elements—hands, chairs, glasses—and began fragmenting her paintings. In *Art Park* (1981) we see, spread across the multiple, angular pieces, a dripping brush on an open palm. An oscillation is thus deliberately initiated between representation and abstraction. We have the hand and the brush, which we can "read." But we also have devices—the distortion of the hand and the exploding of the entire painting—that make this difficult and in the process introduce another set of terms: shape, color, pattern, and part-to-whole relationships. The result is a painting of more formalist interest than anything else, in contrast to Jensen's, which take a keen interest in but transcend the merely formal to achieve an autonomous, poetic language.

Joan Brown and Jack Beal were in a dual show at the Frumkin Gallery in March, showing work from the Sixties. Of the two, Beal fared less well. In pictures such as *Still Life with Vanity Mirror* (1963), his characteristic high-key color is locked in combat with a great profusion of form. Images cohere with great effort; we find ourselves groping for the image amid a great density of color, form, and brushstroke.

One exception is *The Saw* (1964), where we see, in more muted tones, a view from the back of a house toward trees and a road. Here the expressiveness is focused on composition, not color. An erratic, psychologically charged perspective leads us from foreground into distant space, lending a quality of instability, even mania, to an otherwise ordinary vista.

Joan Brown is one of the Bay Area painters who worked in San Francisco in the Fifties and Sixties seeking to reinvigorate the Abstract Expressionist style they had inherited from the East with a return to figuration. The entire group, by the way—including David Park, Paul Wonner, Richard Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff, and Nathan Oliveira, as well as Joan Brown—was the subject of an exhibition at the Gray Art Gallery entitled "The Figurative Mode: Bay Area Painting, 1956-1966."

Seen at Frumkin, Brown's paintings have held up well. In general, her subjects are more informal than those of her fellows—for example, *Noel's First Christmas* (1963), which shows a zanily grinning child in front of a heavily decorated Christmas tree. But she does meet up with their interests in light, paint and gesture in paintings such as *Lolita,* the side view of a nude.

The most conspicuous characteristics of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

these exuberant, highly expressionistic pictures are their abundant use and economic handling of paint. Paint performs many functions simultaneously here: drawing and coloring; structuring the image and giving it atmosphere; standing out on the surface and dissolving into illusion.

This presents a number of constructive ambiguities with regard to light and space. In *Lolita,* a luminous space such as is found in Diebenkorn's work periodically flickers through the thick, surface-hugging paint swaths. It is as though Brown wanted the effect but trusted it only when it could be held in check by its opposite: the paint's thickness and materiality. Interestingly, this dialectic precisely reflects the styles of the two dominant influences in San Francisco at that time: the abstract space of Mark Rothko and the encrusted surfaces of Clifford Still. What makes the work of Brown and her fellows so rewarding is the absence of the sort of prodigality to be found in so much of today's figural expressionism.

A season that opened with Mary Boone's show of late work by Picabia entered its twilight phase with the Robert Miller Gallery presenting late de Chirico. Rarely do the workings of the art world display such symmetry. As with Picabia, there was something unusual about both the work and the circumstances of the de Chirico exhibition.

Careers are normally resuscitated in whole or in part in response to some sort of realignment. Work once opposed to the aesthetic of an historical moment, or to the bulk of an individual's career, can suddenly seem to fit quite neatly. The late Picasso show at the Guggenheim is a case in point. Spurious links to Neo-Expressionism aside, work which had until recently seemed but a sad aberration appeared with the passage of time at least thematically consistent with what had come before.

But in de Chirico's case, the opposition of late work to early was deliberate. Beginning in the Twenties, he turned his back on his eerie, enigmatic paintings of deserted piazzas and attempted, through classical and mythological motifs, to achieve similarly charged commentaries on the modern condition.

They were poorly received back then, and one can see why. The Miller catalogue claims that *Horses on the Beach* (1943) "reflected the anxieties and fears of the time." But one would hardly know it from the picture, where two horses stand idly on the beach, a classical temple behind. Picasso's Royon paintings of 1939-40 are the place to look for wartime anxiety; one will not find it here.

De Chirico responded to his critics with Duchampian pique: he denied the whole idea of authorship and made bad copies of accredited masterpieces. Yet he wanted it both ways: to the end (he died in 1978) he maintained that he was the greatest painter since Rubens.

"Post-Metaphysical and Baroque" is what the later work is called, the pinnacle of which—at least in the Miller show—is the vast *Capriccio Veneziano alla Maniera di Veronese* of 1951. Here a sixteenth-century baldachin seen in Veronese worm's-eye view dominates the center, two figures in period dress atop it. On either side, in head-on view, stand two colonnades, the eerie, reddish light emanating from within the only vestige of de Chirico's *antica maniera.* At the bottom, visible from the neck up, are a statue and a figure, the latter clothed in period dress and holding a loaded brush as he looks toward the baldachin. Between them, all manner of birds disport: swans, swallows, turkeys.

For years such paintings were tactfully ignored by art historians and critics. In 1982, the Modern omitted this portion of de Chirico's *oeuvre* from its retrospective. Yet suddenly it is in vogue, and an artist who was once considered a burned-out case is now viewed by a younger generation of artists as a fertile progenitor enjoying tardy recognition.

What these younger artists—Jedd Garet, Julian Schnabel, and Sandro Chia, among them—embrace is the very "badness" of de Chirico's later work, seeing in it the oppor-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tunity to strike an appropriately ironic stance in relation to their craft and its history. This in turn frees them from the intolerable burden of seriousness and ambition. Unwilling or unable to do what nearly every artist before them has done—come to terms with their artistic forebears—these artists have drawn from the late phases of de Chirico and Picabia the alibi and the pictorial language with which to dismiss the past as irrelevant. For what greater license for heresy can one have than the apostasy of a founding member of the order? In the old days, it was Matisse and Picasso one had to work one's way through, and after them, Pollock. Not to do so was to admit the truth of one's deepest fear, that these men had said everything, in which case why get out of bed in the morning? Now one can do an end-run around history by "quoting" from the ash heap.

In this context, de Chirico's *Capriccio* takes on a new meaning. It appropriates a historical style—Veronese's Mannerism—and inserts it into a classicizing *campagna* in a deliberately jarring manner. The Mannerism is then exaggerated to the point of camp by the bottom figure in the painting, with his longing upward gaze and his flushed and bloated features suggestive of sybaritic excess. Finally there are the birds, whose incongruity and frenzy add a concluding note of comic absurdity.

These are the characteristics seized on by de Chirico's younger champions. What it all adds up to—and this is the appeal—is a reduction of the classical canon to ridicule and thus a voiding of its hold over them. Lest the significance of this not be immediately apparent, it should be remembered that modernism has always defined itself in terms of, not in opposition to, its historical past. Seen through postmodernist eyes, *Capriccio* is telling us that this bankrupt canon cannot, and therefore need not, be heeded.

The key phrase here, though, is "through postmodernist eyes," for only by removing these paintings from their proper historical context, and inverting all norms of judgment could they live any life at all. In actuality, they do not match up to the concerted, serious achievements of modern art, being more on the order of those paintings found in restaurants. The fact that claims of importance are being made for them is embarrassing and, frankly, a little sad.

Interestingly, de Chirico himself has the last word on all of this in a work that eloquently summarizes the innate schizophrenia of his career. In *Double Self-Portrait in a Frame* (1955) de Chirico shows himself in front of another self-portrait, this one looking balefully at the figure in front of it. It suggests one side of his nature was never comfortable with de Chirico the *pasticheur*. What a pity he paid so little heed and continued to the end, as Breton perceived so early, using the smoke screen of rhetoric as a beneficent filter between his work and its viewers' critical faculties.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lincoln Perry **William Zingaro** Joan Brady Irene Buszko James Childs James Cook William Clutz Richard Crozier Jillian Denby David Dewey **Joellyn Duesberry** Kathryn Freeman Sheila Gardner John Gordon Theophil Groell George Harkins John Stuart Ingle **Simeon Lagodich** Seaver Leslie Tomar Levine Thomas Newbolt Lincoln Perry William Zingaro Joan Brady **Irene Buszko** James Childs James Cook William Clutz Richard Crozier Jillian Denby David Dewey Joellyn Duesberry Kathryn Freeman Sheila Gardner John Gordon Theophil Groell George Harkins John Stuart Ingle Simeon Lagodich Seaver Leslie **Tomar Levine** Thomas Newbolt Lincoln Perry William Zingaro Joan Brady Irene Buszko James Childs James Cook William Clutz Richard Crozier Jillian Denby David Dewey Joellyn Duesberry **Kathryn Freeman** Sheila Gardner John Gordon Theophil Groell George Harkins John Stuart Ingle Simeon Lagodich **Seaver Leslie** Tomar Levine Thomas Newbolt Lincoln Perry William Zingaro Joan Brady Irene Buszko **James Childs** James Cook William Clutz Richard Crozier Jillian Denby David Dewey Joellyn Duesberry Kathryn Freeman Sheila Gardner John Gordon Theophil Groell George Harkins **John Stuart Ingle** Simeon Lagodich Seaver Leslie Tomar Levine Thomas Newbolt Lincoln Perry William Zingaro Joan Brady Irene Buszko James Childs **James Cook** William Clutz Richard Crozier Jillian Denby David Dewey Joellyn Duesberry Kathryn Freeman **Sheila Gardner** John Gordon Theophil Groell George Harkins John Stuart Ingle Simeon Lagodich Seaver Leslie Tomar Levine Thomas Newbolt Lincoln Perry William Zingaro Joan Brady Irene Buszko James Childs James Cook **William Clutz** Richard Crozier Jillian Denby David Dewey Joellyn Duesberry Kathryn Freeman Sheila Gardner John Gordon **Theophil Groell** George Harkins John Stuart Ingle Simeon Lagodich Seaver Leslie Tomar Levine Thomas Newbolt Lincoln Perry William Zingaro Joan Brady Irene Buszko James Childs James Cook William Clutz **Richard Crozier** Jillian Denby David Dewey Joellyn Duesberry Kathryn Freeman Sheila Gardner **John Gordon** Theophil Groell George Harkins John Stuart Ingle Simeon Lagodich Seaver Leslie Tomar Levine Thomas Newbolt Lincoln Perry William Zingaro Joan Brady Irene Buszko James Childs James Cook William Clutz Richard Crozier **Jillian Denby** David Dewey Joellyn Duesberry Kathryn Freeman Sheila Gardner John Gordon Theophil Groell George Harkins John Stuart Ingle Simeon Lagodich Seaver Leslie Tomar Levine **Thomas Newbolt** Lincoln Perry William Zingaro **Joan Brady** Irene Buszko James Childs James Cook William Clutz Richard Crozier Jillian Denby David Dewey Joellyn Duesberry Kathryn Freeman Sheila Gardner John Gordon Theophil Groell **George Harkins** John Stuart Ingle Simeon Lagodich Seaver Leslie Tomar Levine Thomas Newbolt **Lincoln Perry** William Zingaro Joan Brady Irene Buszko James Childs James Cook William Clutz Richard Crozier Jillian Denby **David Dewey** Joellyn Duesberry Kathryn Freeman

TATISTCHEFF

TATISTCHEFF

50 WEST 57 ST. • NEW YORK 10019 • (212) 664-0907

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Letter from London

Greeks invade Bloomsbury

by Herb Greer

When I am at a loose end in London and feeling jittery or upset, one of the best cures for the condition is an excursion up to Bloomsbury and the British Museum. Here my exhibit of choice is to be found in the Elgin Rooms and the Duveen Gallery—those famous sculptures rescued by Lord Elgin from destruction in Athens at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Known as the Elgin Marbles, these fine sculptural fragments from the Parthenon now bear the spiritual claw marks of Greece's own Wicked Witch of the East, better known as Melina Mercouri, the Greek socialist government's minister of culture. For some time she has been nagging the British government, media, and public about taking the Elgin Marbles back to Greece. "For every Greek," she says, "they represent our identity, our soul, our blood. We have fought for them." She gives no specifics about where this bloody battle has taken place, but her idea is that these classical masterpieces should be removed from the expert care of the British Museum and transported to the precincts of the Parthenon ruins, which are suffering serious damage from the atmospheric pollution in Athens, said to be almost the worst in Europe if not the world. Here, it is understood, a museum would be built—eventually—to receive the Marbles.

No plausible explanation has been given as to why the Elgin Marbles should be singled out in this way. Miss Mercouri has said that her proposed gesture would help to end the "imperialism of museums," though she seems not at all worried about the "Winged Victory of Samothrace," which can be found at the (imperialistic?) Louvre, or about the myriad other samples of ancient Greek identity, soul, blood, and so on which are scattered around the world in various (imperialistic) museums. It is the Elgin Marbles which excite her. My own theory about this is that by the time her Elgin Marbles Museum has been built on or near the Acropolis, the acid air of Athens will have eaten the Parthenon down to a clutter of marble bumps and stumps. Whatever she says about blood and soil or soul, I suspect (and I may be quite wrong) that Miss Mercouri is really anxious about the consequent damage to Greece's tourist trade. Who, after all, wants to travel thousands of miles to look at bumps and stumps? But if these magnificent sculptures are on the Acropolis, as proof positive that the Parthenon was once there, visitors will continue to come, helping to sustain the Greek economy and expand the restaurant and hotel trade in Athens. This seems to me the only reasonable and Marxist explanation.

Earlier this year the Right Honorable Neil Kinnock, new leader of the now very left-wing British Labour Party, trekked to Athens to consult with his fellow socialists on matters of common concern. Mr. Kinnock too hates all kinds of imperialism, including the museum variety. He suggested at a press conference that "the relocation of the Marbles would be part of a process of unlocking

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the treasures of European civilization." He proposed a time-sharing formula which would mean "exchange, occasional rotation, and access to the Marbles." According to a BBC report, his plan extended beyond the Elgin Marbles to a periodical shuttling and shuffling of all major works of art in all European museums. The Elgin Marbles alone weigh several tons, and it may be that Mr. Kinnock had not thought through the implications of his plan. At what *The Times* called "a prolonged taverna dinner" someone—perhaps Miss Mercouri—dropped a word in his ear, and no more was heard of shuffling and shuttling. Instead it was announced that when Labour assumed power Mr. Kinnock would return the Marbles to Greece—presumably letting the chips fall where they may.

There would then remain the matter of a "shopping list" of antiquities drawn up by India in the wake of the Greek fuss. Activists on the subcontinent want back, among other things, the Koh-i-noor diamond, which at present is set into one of the British (imperialist) crowns. This antiquarian irredentism has infected Britain itself: a Plaid Cymru (Welsh Nationalist) MP is demanding that all Welsh items held in England be handed over to the Welsh National Museum in Cardiff. Mr. Kinnock, though not a member of Plaid Cymru, is very Welsh indeed, and his deep sympathy for the Third World is well known. Avoiding bad jokes about the British losing their marbles if they elect Mr. Kinnock as prime minister, I do wonder what he would leave in the London museums, besides a few paintings (English), some literary souvenirs (ditto), and the relics of the Sutton Hoo Burial.

The dottiness of politicians who meddle in the cultural world is only surpassed by the "serious" artists who take the plunge into political agitation. Everyone knows about Vanessa Redgrave (of whom more in a few moments), and Glenda Jackson has many times trumpeted her faith in socialism. Playwrights (some discussed in earlier London letters) have fairly trampled each other here in the rush to join the comradely ranks. It is interesting that the experience of conversion does not affect the quality of acting (there may be a moral in this); but in Britain it has not done the playwrights much good.

There is no obvious reason why a mixture of politics and theatrical writing should bake into bad work. The history of plays with a political edge is long and honorable, going back at least to Aristophanes. Political spectacles were known in the Byzantine theater; there is political grumbling in *The Second Shepherd's Play,* and the Essex conspirators tried—not very successfully—to use Shakespeare's *Richard II* in their plot against Elizabeth I. Beaumarchais's plays were notoriously political in his time, and opera has its examples too. Taking a couple at random, *Tosca* is full of political echoes, and Auber's *Masaniello* once ignited a major political riot. The point is that political theater is neither new nor necessarily bad. What does seem new is the deleterious effect of the political ingredient, at least in contemporary Britain, where otherwise excellent writers are concerned.

The most recent case is Harold Pinter. Once the most nonpolitical of playwrights, he has undergone the familiar Damascus-road process. Western "hypocrisy" shocked him when Allende was overthrown in Chile. He joined CND, began to attend rallies, and in the fullness of time appeared on television for the cause, wearing the pompous glum expression of a man who is taken seriously at dinner parties. He wrote a poem and a five-minute sketch, both of which were political. At one of those dinner parties he found himself in conversation with two attractive Turkish girls. The subject: Turkish academics who had been imprisoned for belonging to a peace movement. Pinter insisted that the poor wretches would be tortured. The Turkish girls shrugged and suggested he had a vivid imagination. Incensed, he hurried home and—so the story goes—took three white-hot days to write a "full-blooded" political play, *One for the Road.* Not having read the poem or seen that five-minute sketch, I felt I should get to know the "full-blooded" item, and hied myself out to West

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

London, where it was being staged as a "lunchtime" show in the studio of the Lyric Hammersmith.

The event was one to be taken seriously, so I had done my homework. This is what Pinter said about the play in a newspaper interview:

> This play comes out of my life and out of my understanding of life. What we are encouraged to think in the West is that we have a moral advantage, that we inhabit a superior moral position. But the United States brought down the Chilean regime and they're doing the same in Nicaragua. They are supporting the most fiendishly appalling system in El Salvador. If you shake hands with murderers you have no moral position.

His understanding of life tells him that the Americans mean to fight a limited nuclear war in Europe, and he reckons we will be lucky to get to the end of the century. He sees the relationship between Britain and the United States as exactly like that between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. These brilliant political insights furnish the background to his new play.

It is said on good authority that Pinter is obsessed with torture, and *One for the Road* does bear this out. One of those anonymous-room settings with a barred window contains an interrogator (beautifully played by Alan Bates). He calls in a dissenter (Roger Lloyd Pack), who has been thoroughly bloodied before the interview. The interrogator then browbeats his victim, using an ugly parody of polite conversation which dips into occasional abuse, plus prurient and insulting remarks about the victim's wife. After many minutes of this there is a blackout. The lights come up on the interrogator and the dissenter's wife (Jenny Quayle), who has also been roughly handled: her dress is torn and her hair is askew. There is more browbeating and verbal torment, including the repeated comment that the woman's son is a "little prick." The next scene has the interrogator trying and failing to intimidate the boy. In the final tableau, the original victim is humiliated for several minutes more and then told he is "free to go." Before he does, the interrogator tells him that his son *was* a "little prick." (We understand: he has been done away with.) Shock, horror, blackout.

The dissenter hardly speaks at all, is neither asked for nor gives any information. The inquiries about his connubial sex life are rhetorical persecution. It follows that this unsavory little drama contains no drama at all, because the victims are totally helpless and passive. This is a common dramaturgical failing among political primitives in show business who try to dramatize their so-called ideas. Pinter, when he was hoeing his old row, was a tidy dramatist with a neat flair for theatrical tension in otherwise rather empty work. Now that he is both *enragé* and *engagé* (an artistically dangerous combination), his technical sense seems to have deserted him. One knows from reading the newspapers that he is upset about the putative torture of some Turkish academics, but this play does not refer to that. There is only a sadistic interrogator enjoying himself in an anonymous room.

Now, I have never been tortured except perhaps in a metaphorical sense while watching cheap nasty plays like this one. But I have (for what it's worth) been interrogated by secret police, and I could have told Pinter that the object of such questioning is to elicit information. Cruel fun may come into it, but that is incidental and has nothing much to do with politics. The point is mentioned because, as I understand it, Pinter intends to make some kind of important political statement with this play. And yet there is nothing in it but cruel fun. If any statement emerges it is the acutely banal observation that psychopathic sadists are not to be trusted with a responsible task like interrogation, because they are too hooked on their vicious pleasures to get any information, and this is very unpleasant. Pinter seems to think we need him to tell us this. What can I say? I knew it already, I can think of no intelligent adult who doesn't know it, and the statement (if that is what it is) does not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

deal with politics anyhow, but with a technical matter. What Pinter has actually given us is a gloss on Krafft-Ebing that does not belong in the Lyric Hammersmith but in one of the flashier Soho establishments which furnish vicarious thrills to the S-M trade.

Not wanting to be negative about this, I would urge Mr. Pinter to study some of the examples given above, all by authors who knew something about mixing politics and theater. But he is surely familiar with these. It could help if he tried to widen the scope of his political experience, taking in something besides CND pamphlets, left-wing Labour Party propaganda, and overheated journalism about Central America and Turkey. This might make him sound less like the political version of a seven-year-old who has just discovered that grown-ups do not always keep their promises.

David Pownall has not acquired the vatic reputation of Pinter, and is technically not as good a dramatist. But he has lived and worked in the extra-theatrical world, as a personnel officer at Ford's Dagenham plant, and as an employee of the copper-mining industry in Zambia. Subsequently, he took to writing for the theater, radio, and television, and his plays have been widely and successfully produced. Experience in real-life occupations may be what gives point and substance to his *Master Class,* currently at Wyndham's Theatre in Charing Cross Road and soon to open at Washington's Kennedy Center before moving on to Broadway.

The play is not about cars, nor yet about the mining of copper. It delves into the painful relationship between the tyrant and the imaginative artist—in this case the composer. We are shown an encounter in two acts between the team of Stalin and Zhdanov on the one hand, and Prokofiev and Shostakovich on the other. The basis for this fantasy was the Zhdanov purge in 1948, when these composers and others were accused of "formalist perversions and undemocratic tendencies" in their music.

Like Plato, the Soviet leaders were (they still are) wary of the influence of music, and sanguine about its power to influence politics through the human soul. They regarded it, like the other arts, as a social-engineering tool which, as Stalin said, had to be used like heavy industry or agriculture. We in the West consider the arts in a differently practical way, less as tools for social engineering than as levers on a mysterious fruit machine with a giant jackpot. At the same time we recognize that there is far more to the artistic imagination than this, and treat with some awe that odd numen which is generally spoiled by the intrusion of political or financial *arrière-pensée.* This appears most true where serious musical composition is concerned[1]: no one talks of writing an election symphony or a "hit" string quartet. Accordingly, we defer to that particular branch of the arts as to no other. The violation of this deference is what gives force to the confrontation in *Master Class.* The composers have been called to a meeting with Stalin; they are to be persuaded to endorse current Party policy at a conference which is in session in a nearby hall, and Stalin is going to show them how to compose some real Communist music, a people's cantata on a Georgian folk epic. Thus they will be transformed into the social engineers of the new civilization.

The terms of the play are very rough and ready, and the second act falls apart into repetitious argument. But it remains amusing and holds the attention for most of the time. Stalin and Zhdanov are cartoons, bawling parade-ground philistines who express their hatred of "elitist" music at the end of the first act by coolly smashing a large collection of Prokofiev's recorded music. This climax evokes a stark sense of horror and disgust, sitting as it does on the situation's bottom line: brute force may not be able to grasp the tenuous filaments of the imagination, but it can destroy a talent's human vessel and for this reason must command a certain respect.

---

1 There are exceptions, of course, including the operas already mentioned and works like Copland's *Lincoln Portrait,* though the latter may be more idealistic than political.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A lame, ill Prokofiev and a jittery Shostakovich who has seen it all before hover between tact and pale-faced terror at the bullying outbursts of Stalin and Zhdanov. The finely judged playing of Peter Kelly as Prokofiev and David Bamber as Shostakovich make them into delicately credible foils for the bellowing performances of Timothy West as Stalin and Jonathan Adams as Zhdanov. West is a punchy and coarse if somewhat porcine performer, which suits the caricaturish outline of his part. As a rough old rhinestone, Adams suggests—I think this is intentional—the second man on a team of old-fashioned third-degree-style cops.

Some of the Prokofiev records are played before they are smashed, and there is also live piano music performed onstage by Bamber and Kelley. This helps to bring the play up out of its cartoon dimension and to lend some truth to the clash of composers and tyrants. The victims here are neither passive nor helpless but skilled, gifted men who can and do hold their own in the musical combat between philistine and genius. They have no choice but to agree to address the conference in suitable terms. But when the play develops its grotesque and hilarious attempt by Stalin to "teach" the composition of a folk cantata with "tunes that can be whistled," it becomes clear that not the composers but the tyrants are the weak side in this conflict. They can smash wax records, they can eliminate human beings in their millions, but they cannot perform the simple, irreducibly mysterious creative act of composing a decent piece of music. What is more, they cannot bully the real composers into doing it just so. The cantata is a fiasco, and must be abandoned with vague promises to finish it later. As the composers go off to render unto Caesar what is his at the conference, they are the real winners in this apparently hopeless contest of souls.

A lower order of soul is at stake in *The Aspern Papers,* in Nash's beautiful Haymarket Theatre. For one thing the play is fictional, a figment of Henry James's literary fancy. It was adapted by Michael Redgrave from James's story of the same name, which was based upon an incident that took place in Florence in 1867: a young man, William Graham, cultivated the friendship of Claire Clairmont, who had been the mistress of Byron. She told Graham a great deal of what she remembered about Byron and Shelley; after her death in 1879 he published these confidences in a book, *Last Links with Byron, Shelley, and Keats.*

James's story transforms Byron into a dead American poet, named Aspern, who has left many of his papers with an ex-mistress, now a very old lady called Juliana Bordereau. She lives in a decaying Venetian palazzo or villa with her daughter Tina and Assunta, an Italian maid. Into this ménage comes an unscrupulous critic, Henry Jarvis, who knows of the papers and is determined to ferret them out by fair means or foul, and publish them. He hides his identity from the women and works on the affections of the daughter, a lean and lonely spinster who soon falls in love with him. In time, with her help and that of his crafty valet Pasquale, Jarvis finds himself on his knees in front of the chest which contains the Aspern papers. Before he can open it, the old woman staggers in from her bedroom, sees what he is doing, gasps "You—publishing—*scoundrel*!" and collapses, struck down by unendurable fury. Jarvis flees without seeing the papers, but returns after Miss Bordereau's funeral, hoping that the amorous, scrawny daughter will now give him what he wants. She gives him to understand that she does not intend to betray her mother, but says that if he were a member of the family there would be no betrayal. He recoils from this backhanded demand for marriage, saying with barely concealed distaste that it would not do. Tina tells him that she was testing him; she has, she says, burned the papers, and invites him to open the box and see for himself. Possibly afraid that she may be lying, he draws back, says goodbye, and leaves. She opens the box, takes out the papers, goes to the stove, and feeds them into the fire, perhaps reflecting that they, like the affections of the handsome Mr. Jarvis, are

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

after all a kind of illusion which does not deserve to survive. The curtain comes down on her revenge.

I think Henry James, who could not write a good play to save his life, would have been pleased with Redgrave's adaptation. It is fine, thin, elegant stuff—excellent breedy light entertainment. As with musical comedy, almost everything hangs upon the quality of the performance, and in this respect the play is given very nearly all it needs. Vanessa Redgrave makes the daughter luminous with the pain of betrayed hopes and love, one of the best portrayals of frustrated longing that I have ever seen. Wendy Hiller brings a superb *grande-dame* manner to the part of the old woman, creating the true ghost of a great man's mistress, all gravitas and ferocity muffled by old age, with a streak of tetchiness that lacks any hint of affectation or playing for easy laughs. (It is poignant to remember that when this piece was staged years ago in New York, Dame Wendy played the part of the daughter.)

The role of the unscrupulous young man is almost impossibly aseptic for an ordinary actor, since its only real emotion consists of morbid curiosity about a stack of old papers. Everything else—mostly superficial charm—is dissembled. Olivier might have made something magnetic out of it, and perhaps Michael Redgrave did in the earlier production. Christopher Reeve is not that sort of performer. He is, however, good-looking and has a certain mannequin attractiveness. And though he has not yet learned to sit down in a tailcoat, he did not disgrace himself technically. Sporting a mirthless kitchen-knife smile, he manages a warm-hands-cold-heart persona that fills his part in the action, though it cannot match the excitement of the others. Really, though, this is a quibble; it does not matter much that he could have been better, since this would not have made the play much better. As it is, Miss Redgrave and Dame Wendy provide a generous helping of high style—more than enough to sustain an enjoyable evening in the theater; and this too has its own rarity value.

The old-fashioned quality of *The Aspern Papers* is sympathetic because it is not lumbered with pretensions. When the outmoded is cobbled or hacked into a solemn-faced totem, the effect is different. An awful example, *Sufficient Carbohydrate,* is playing at the Albery Theatre in St. Martin's Lane. It is the first stage play by Dennis Potter, who wrote the prize-winning television series *Pennies From Heaven.* Potter's play is the familiar lament about harsh heartless progress spoiling what is traditional and GOOD. Morality in this case is symbolized by food—the quality nosh made by a good old British firm. Its former owner is bitter because his home-cooking factory has been taken over by a big mean American conglomerate. The Yanks do not care about taste buds. All they want to do is (hrrrk, phthw) make money. To this end they are polluting the venerable British tuck with monosodium glutamate, and making sure the result contains sufficient carbohydrate. The idealistic Brit is on the board of the conglomerate, but he is a pain in the corporate hinder parts, because he drinks rather a lot and keeps making disparaging remarks about monosodium glutamate. So the men at the top have packed him off to a Greek island, where he is sharing a villa with the American hatchet man who must persuade him to resign his seat on the board. The wives are along too, with the American's teenage son from a former marriage.

In this situation, Potter has every ingredient for the most wonderfully side-splitting farce, but that is not what we get. Whereas Harold Pinter is obsessed with nuclear weapons and torture, Potter's *manie* is monosodium glutamate. For some reason which may be chemical, this causes him to treat his material with bathetic solemnity, much in the earnest manner of *Dallas* or *Dynasty.* Also in that manner, most of the action takes place below the waist. The Hatchet Man is having it off with the Brit's pretty but unsatisfied wife. This and the general emptiness of the corporate life have aroused misery in the breast of the Hatchet Man's own spouse. By a twist of plot which I have not yet figured

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

out, she manages to get herself beaten up and kicked by the Brit, and then stumbles upstairs to fall into her stepson's eager arms. When the boy understands that this does not mean she loves him, he too becomes miserable and disillusioned.

What, you may ask, does all this have to do with monosodium glutamate? Well, during the above sequences the Brit, drinking hard and much more interested in food additives than sex, staggers about the place making sarcastic jokes about monosodium glutamate and Americans, usually equating the two. He spends his dawn hours in a calmer state of mind, wistfully contemplating a distant ship crossing the horizon. After his brief detour into mugging, he makes friends with the disappointed teenager, who tells him that there is really no ship on the horizon. It appears to be one of those illusory symbolic ships from the dramatic literature of eighty or so years ago, representing (I think) food without m--------m gl------e. The Brit then resigns his seat on the board and, arm in arm with the boy, strolls away down the beach, hoping to find something clean and pure—maybe a nice piece of driftwood, or even food. The Hatchet Man is left to stew in food additives and deal with the complex problems of two miserable women.

At the moment there are negotiations going on for a New York production of this thing. All I can say is *caveat emptor*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

GRAND STREET

Summer 1984

WILLIAM H. GASS

Culp

A STORY

ELINOR LANGER

TWO ESSAYS

The Measuring Stick
(Josephine Herbst & the FBI)

Witness
(A New Light on Hiss & Chambers)

Stories, Poems, & Articles

PENELOPE GILLIATT EDWARD FIELD ALLEN GROSSMAN
GARY GIDDINS HARRY MATHEWS LEONARD MICHAELS
MARY JO SALTER SONYA DORMAN JAMES MICHIE
TOM DISCH ROBERT ANDREW PARKER KENNETH KOCH
KENNETH BERNARD J. D MCCLATCHY GEORGE STARBUCK

Pilgrim Misery
(Thomas Lovell Beddoes)
CHRISTOPHER RICKS

GRAND STREET, 50 RIVERSIDE DRIVE, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10024

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____
NC

Published quarterly *$16 a year/$20 institutions & foreign*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books

Sailing toward Poland

by Vernon Young

"We spend our lives trying to discover in fact what we are by design." (Ortega y Gasset said it.) Joseph Conrad spent half a lifetime trying to *avoid* what he was by design and the remaining half being equivocal about the design he had in fact discovered.

Within the last four years, two full-scale studies of Conrad have been published: Frederick Karl's *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives* (1979) and Zdzislaw Najder's *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle* (1983).[1] It is difficult to believe that we are not now in possession of all the guidelines we need for any further assessment of this puzzling man and writer, a prophetic example of our century's many artist-expatriates.

Zdzislaw Najder, himself Polish (and an English exile since December 1981), claims to have begun his book in 1957 and completed it in 1977; twelve chapters of it have been published in Polish. *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle* is the English, supplemented, version, translated by his wife. Frederick R. Karl has been working in the field of Conrad research since at least 1956, and his thousand-page biography of Conrad was understandably hailed by reviewers as "exhaustive" and "monumental," "the furthest reach of Conrad scholarship." He is now definitively editing all the available letters.[2]

Actually, Najder and Karl overlap; each shows up in the other's bibliography and only a pedant would argue over the relative importance of many disputed details (usually those of Polish geography or of Conrad's sea-going itinerary). If Karl's critique is fully twice the length of Najder's, this is partly owing to Karl's insistence on conveying three times as much data or surmise than is essential, at every step of the way. Readers who are not specialists in Conradiana may find it irksome to stop and attend whenever Karl is beguiled by analogy, whether it's crucial or merely attractive. Najder is more selective in his proportion of literary sequence to life story. As a countryman of Conrad, he might be expected to reveal a wider margin of sympathy with his subject, yet I can't honestly say that Karl is less sensitive to the intricate balance of Conrad as Pole and as shadow-line Englishman. Karl's insights are often more sophisticated than Najder's, although many of them seem far-fetched. (For example, to help explain Conrad's illnesses as attempts to win attention, Karl compares them to those of the Mahatma Ghandi!) Both authors are tact-

1 *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives* by Frederick R. Karl; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 1008 pages, $14.95. *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle* by Zdzislaw Najder; translated by Halina Carroll-Najder; Rutgers University Press, 647 pages, $30.

2 The first volume of letters was published last year by Cambridge University Press. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad: Volume 1 1861-1897*; edited by Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies; 446 pages $39.50.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fully aware of psychoanalytic clues, and in their overall views do not disagree radically. Najder is perhaps more impressed by Conrad's confident idealism, Karl by his heart of darkness.

Three aspects of Conrad inevitably strike us whenever we return either to the biography or to the fiction of this baffling personality: his incredible, if fluctuating, mastery of our tongue; his lifelong hypochondria (there is no more conciliatory way of putting it); and his recurrent political anxieties, which is to say, his Polishness.

Customarily one illuminates a man's behavior as well as the character of his talent by consulting his origins. In Conrad's case, Karl, no less than Najder, has done so, with engrossing results. It seems to matter little whether an artist's father was tyrannical or benevolent; if the former, the artist strives to avenge himself; if the latter, he strains to improve on him, one way or another. To undo or outdo, these are the imperatives. Conrad's father, Apollo Korzeniowski, certainly benevolent at home, was nonetheless a problematical figure: an aristocrat who by virtue of the Russian yoke fastened to Poland's neck had become a dedicated revolutionary. His self-division, inherited by his son (who was only twelve when his father died), was to become virtually the *raison d'être* of Conrad's life and art.

When Conrad (Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski) was born in 1857, Poland had almost ceased to exist as a coherent nation, having been three times partitioned between 1772 and 1795 among Russia, Austria, and Prussia and, in 1830, defeated in its efforts at unity and liberation by the Congress of Vienna. Another insurrection followed, that of 1863, in which Apollo played an active, albeit fruitless role; it was decisively suppressed by the Imperial regime, which then instituted a network of reforms and prohibitions aimed at liquidating the Polish nobility and incorporating the middle class and peasantry in a Russified bureaucracy, with Russian as its official language. Conrad's father, a landowner and Roman Catholic, poet and translator, was an insurrectionist in the romantic style, impulsive and resolute, unendowed with the saving grace of foresight or with an ideology that went further than a rage for national identity. He imposed upon the child, Jozef, not only his abiding hate of the Russian overlords (at the infant's birth he wrote a poem dedicated "To My Son born in the 85th year of the Muscovite Oppression") but also his Mariolatry, in which his wife, Ewa, and the nation, their "Great Mother," were fervently combined.

Further, and as importunately, the father's dispirited reactions to political defeat, imprisonment, and exile (to another "province" of Poland) were reflected in his ill health and his dependency on Ewa, herself an ailing woman (she died of tuberculosis when Jozef was four years old). He depended heavily besides on the consolations of his son, who was as helpful to his dying father as he was inescapably stifled by the sickroom atmosphere, from which he tried to escape by becoming in his turn an incipient invalid. (Najder believes that in this period he displayed epileptic symptoms.)

Following Conrad's father's death, and for many years thereafter, Conrad's uncle (on his mother's side), Tadeusz Bobrowski, became his surrogate father and seldom hesitated to express his disapproval whenever Conrad seemed to exhibit his father's principles *in extremis,* to which Tadeusz was root and branch opposed. Although he was as patriotic as his brother-in-law, he was by nature a temporizer, a middle-of-the-road reformer willing to wait, concede, protest, negotiate, and wait again. For such tactics the quixotic Apollo had no talent and no liking. He destroyed himself; Tadeusz survived. And the maturing Conrad could scarcely avoid weighing in balance these disparate counsels and their consequences to society at large. Add to these influences his infirm and idolatrous conception of Woman—the ephemeral mother—and you have, remarkably compressed, the personae of the Conrad universe. Frederick Karl sums up adroitly one phase of these parental origins as he describes Conrad leaving Poland

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for Marseilles and the life of a seafarer at the age of seventeen:

> For as Conrad left Poland, he was to substitute the sea for his father's immersion in the adventure of political insurrection. He was to substitute commitment to crew and ship for Apollo's devotion to fellow conspirators and country. He was, still later, like Apollo, to become a literary man, although with greater application and success . . . . He was to complain lifelong, of ailments, pains, crippling illnesses, as a parallel to Apollo's own poor health, declining condition, and need for personal attention . . . . Even as it seemed to end, Conrad's Polish life had just begun.

To the question of Conrad's admiration of the British, and of the English language, the answer remains ambiguous; probably it is less romantic than he gave out in *A Personal Record* with that inspiring anecdote about hearing English for the first time on a visit to Switzerland, at the age of sixteen, and being henceforth in its thrall. (Whenever Conrad told the truth—i.e., in letters or in biographical reminiscences—we are at liberty to doubt him; whenever he told lies—i.e., wrote fiction—we can trust him all the way.) A realistic explanation of his Anglophilia is more likely related to his most urgent motive for leaving Poland when he did: he was eligible to be drafted into Russian military service. Very probably a cognate reason was instrumental in his not continuing to serve on French ships and for not settling in France (assuming he was to settle somewhere) despite his familiarity with the French language and his affection for French literature. England had no compulsory military service; once Conrad had established himself on an upward career in the British merchant marine, from able seaman to officer, he was logically and out of respect committed to the country's institutions.

What is unique in Conrad's case is not the plain fact of his acquiring English but his becoming with it a prose stylist of the first rank (idiosyncracies allowed for) on the basis of English he could have learned nowhere but among seamen and from the printed page. Strangely, if he felt affinity with French (which Najder claims is closer to Polish), he had little for *spoken* English after eleven years of conversing in it, even while he was mastering the written version. Everyone agrees that all his life Conrad spoke with a marked accent. Ernest Dawson, in his reminiscence, wrote that readers who heard him speak were continually amazed "because he could not utter two words in English without betraying that it was not his mother tongue." Conrad may have been more than a little stubborn in this regard, which Dawson tactfully implies, adding that "there were certain words which he, so to speak, declined to learn." For many years his letters, when not Polish, were French. Not before 1886 did he write to a Polish acquaintance in English; in many later instances he wrote bilingual letters (to Cunninghame Graham, for one) and with Ford Madox Ford he conversed most comfortably in French. At that time (around 1898), on shore and committed to a career in writing, his ostensible reason for wanting to collaborate with Ford was his continuing difficulty with English, the slowness with which he composed, and the fluency he hoped to acquire if, with a master of English, he could discuss minutely the shadings of the language he was employing. According to Ford he told W. E. Henley: "When I write I think in French and then translate the words of my thoughts." This seems the hardest possible way of doing it and for that reason alone we can believe him; he did everything in the hardest possible way.

Conrad's long lingering debt to the French language (to the echoes of its substantives, for example, and to its dissimilar use of the definite article) has been unarguably analyzed by Yves Hervouet, in his study in progress, "Conrad and the French Language."[3] It would be helpful to have a like demonstration from Najder, who alleges that "an analysis of [Conrad's] style reveals the imprint of Polish in all his works." I confess myself

3 See *Conradiana*, Vol. XIV, I, 1982.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mystified. If, as Najder argues and as Hervouet confirms, Conrad's English was readily governed by his French, how might an imprint of Polish remain audible "in all his works"? *All* his writing covers an excessive range of temperamental stress. Is it possible, we may finally wonder, that he thought in three different languages, depending on the pull of the moment? His letters to Marguerite Poradowska, written in French, were typical of the self-dramatizing agony of his crises when he was pushing a work to its conclusion. "Forgive me for not having written sooner but I am in the midst of struggling with Chapter XI; a struggle to the death, you know! If I let go, I am lost! . . . Everything is still chaos, but, slowly, ghosts are transformed into living flesh, floating vapours turn solid; and who knows?—perhaps something will be born from the collision of indistinct ideas." That accompanied the end of *Almayer's Folly.* Soon he was in the toils of *An Outcast of the Islands.* "Here is Chapter VIII finished at last. Four to go! Four centuries of agony—four minutes of delight and then the end—an empty head—discouragement and eternal doubt . . . . Good God! How black, black, black, everything is!" In English he was as impressionistic. His account of completing *Lord Jim,* in his report to Galsworthy, while showing calm of mind, is as fragmented and rhetorical.

> Ten-minute meals. A great hush. Cigarette ends growing into a great mound similar to a cairn over a dead hero. Moon rose over the barn looked in at the window and climbed out of sight. Dawn broke, brightened. I put the lamp out and went on, with the morning breeze blowing the sheets of MS. all over the room. Sun rose. I wrote the last word and went into the dining room. Six o'clock.

And this is Conrad's early narrative style in fiction, at its most adjectival (in *Youth*)—phosphorescent, visionary, loaded with similes in triplicate, and dazzling pathetic fallacies. (The abandoned *Judea* is burning in the Indian Ocean.)

M. Knoedler & Co.

Walter Darby Bannard
Michael David
Richard Diebenkorn
Friedel Dzubas
Herbert Ferber
Adolph & Esther Gottlieb Foundation, Inc.
Nancy Graves
Howard Hodgkin
Robert Motherwell
Jules Olitski
Estate of Ludwig Sander
Estate of David Smith
Frank Stella
John Walker

19 East 70 Street. New York 10021
Telephone (212) 794-0550

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> She burned furiously; mournful and imposing like a funeral pile kindled in the night, surrounded by the sea, watched over by the stars. A magnificent death had come like a grace, like a gift, like a reward to that old ship at the end of her laborious days. The surrender of her weary ghost to the keeping of stars and sea was stirring like the sight of a glorious triumph. The masts fell just before daybreak, and for a moment there was a burst and turmoil of sparks that seemed to fill with flying fire the night patient and watchful, the vast night lying silent upon the sea.

I am inclined to believe that Conrad's persistent and often orgasmic eloquence in a language he had to struggle with every page of the way was a response to something beyond the elements of syntax or of idiom. English answered a need—call it physical or metaphysical—which French, and for all I know, Polish, could not fulfill. To Edward Garnett he complained, in a letter of 1898:

> I seem to have lost all *sense* of style and yet I am haunted, mercilessly, by the *necessity* of style. And that story I can't write weaves itself into all I see, into all I speak, into all I think, into the lines of every book I try to read. I haven't read for days. You know how bad it is when one *feels* one's liver, or lungs. Well I feel my brain. I am distinctly conscious of the contents of my head. My story is there in a fluid—in an evading shape. I can't get hold of it. It is all there, to bursting, yet I can't get hold of it no more than you can grasp a handful of water.

And I find, in a capital essay by E. M. Cioran, "Style as Risk,"[4] wherein he suggests why Saint-Simon chafed at the French language and La Bruyère did not, a consummate explanation of Conrad's preference for English.

> A writer's manner is conditioned physiologically; he possesses a rhythm of his own, urgent and irreducible . . . . Everything in [Saint-Simon] required that profusion of interlinked, luxuriant, mobile phrases. The imperatives of syntax must have pursued him like a torment and an obsession. His breath, even its cadences, imposed that fluid and ample movement which surmounts the solitude and the barrier of words.

In contrast, La Bruyère chose to remain *within* his nature rather than to transcend it.

> Whereby [La Bruyère] espouses the genius of a language which has specialized in the sighs of the intellect, a language for which whatever is not cerebral is suspect or null. Condemned to dryness by its very perfection, unfit to assimilate and translate the Iliad and the Bible, Shakespeare and Don Quixote, cleared of any affective charge and somehow exempt of its origin, French is closed to the primordial and the cosmic, to all that precedes and transcends man.

The primordial and the cosmic. These were the reaches which Conrad's prose was forever trying to reveal, although he hastened to deny it if anyone else inferred too strongly that such was his aim. For he prided himself at the same time on his allegiance to the sanely circumscribed society of men, to the spirit of the shipshape and to those principles of tempered subordination he admired in the British scheme of things. Maintaining this tension of forces in his novels was the ground of his ordeal. Although there is nothing in Conrad's behavior sufficiently consistent to be called invariable, it does seem as if his greatest turmoils and exhaustions accompanied his efforts to keep his personal conflicts at arm's length, while rendering justice to the reality he was trying to depict. His two greatest political novels, *Nostromo* and *Under Western Eyes* caused him the greatest suffering, even more than *Lord Jim* had done. In them he was again face to face with his own divided convictions, his

4 Cioran is a Rumanian who *writes in French!* The translation above is by Richard Howard. See *The Temptation to Exist* by E. M. Cioran; Quadrangle, 1968.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

loyalty to the insurgent national cause he had abandoned and his acquired skepticism toward the ethos of the compulsive revolutionary. In *Nostromo* he must have struggled desperately to objectify his exposure and self-justification (in the character of Decoud) and pretend that he was writing about events and choices in an imaginary South American seaport, Sulaco. All critics agree, I believe, that the work is a magnificent failure, his most ambitious effort, his most comprehensive, and bitter, essay on the triumph of "material interests"; yet, as a fiction, far too protracted, with long interludes in which narrative doesn't move; and much too schematic in its formulation of characters who represent political categories. The setting is a miracle of imagination working on imperfect memory and there are moments of ferocity unequaled in the political fiction of our time, save by André Malraux and Milovan Djilas.

Upon its completion, Conrad tried, in Capri, to recover from its associations with his excavated memories of Poland vis-à-vis Russia, but for weeks he was unable to sort out in his mind several outlines of future work he hoped to relay to his editors. His single achieved statement in those early weeks of 1905 (the year of the first Russian revolution) was a political treatise, a major contribution, as it proved, to one of the most critical subjects of the new century: "Autocracy and War." Few anti-Russian accusations have been more encompassing than Conrad's paragraphs on the matter. (Beside reflecting his long smoldering sense of historical outrage, they illustrate his impenitent flair for the topographical metaphor and the ritualistic cadence.)

> She [Russia] is not an empty void; she is a yawning chasm open between East and West; a bottomless abyss that has swallowed up every hope of mercy, every aspiration towards personal dignity, towards freedom, towards knowledge, every ennobling desire of the heart, every redeeming whisper of conscience. Those that have peered into that abyss, where the dreams of Panslavism, of universal conquest, mingled with the hate and contempt for Western ideas, drift impotently like shapes of mist, know well that it is bottomless; that there is no ground for anything that could in the remotest degree serve even the lowest interests of mankind.

With his conception of *Under Western Eyes,* Conrad submitted himself even further to accessions of remorse and shudders of aversion, as he labored (during 1908 and 1909), by way of an invented professor of languages, to remain detached from the dilemma he had contrived for his equivocal hero. The student, Razumov, scorning the radical ideals of his fellow intellectuals, is therewith embraced by the regime and sent to Geneva to ferret out the expatriate accomplices of the friend he has betrayed: a terrifying story with a ghastly denouement. Karl quite pertinently points out the uncanny coincidence by which, in the midst of his toils, Conrad's psychogenic rehearsal of his childhood situation involved his wife, Jessie, and his sons Borys and John. In a letter to Galsworthy, Conrad, besides complaining of his disastrous financial condition, recited a litany of illnesses: his gout, fevers and chills, neuralgia; Borys's rheumatic fever; the ailments of John (two years old)—bronchitis, fevers, and coughs—and finally Jessie's afflictions: damaged knees and chronic heart trouble. Relating Borys's position in the household, Conrad explained: "He has not a very lively time; he plays the part of the devoted son, coming in several times a day to see whether he can do something for me—I am very crippled and once anchored before the table can not budge very well." Karl astutely observes that in this sentence alone Conrad's three lives are portrayed: "the duplication of the Polish experience, his own career as a writer—now fifty, one year older than Apollo at his death—and the sea career implicit in his use of the phrase 'anchored before the table.'"

From this breakdown Conrad never fully recovered, either as man or artist. The most generous readings of *Chance, Victory, The Rescue, The Arrow of Gold* must find them not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

only inferior to *Under Western Eyes* but as simply not being in the same creative world as the earlier outpost-of-progress narratives. He did sustain two memorable short novels, however—*The Secret Sharer* and *The Shadow Line*. The latter, published in 1915, is to my sense consistently underrated in the literature; with its mingled tone of congeniality and premonition, it seems to forecast a less harried engagement with Conrad's intrinsic theme, trial by water.

> Only the young have such moments. I don't mean the very young. No. The very young have, properly speaking, no moments. It is the privilege of early youth to live in advance of its days in all the beautiful continuity of hope which knows no pauses and no introspection.

Never was he more English than in the inflections of these opening sentences. But *The Shadow Line* (1917) was not a new beginning. Conrad was physically depleted; he so believed and many witnesses have given the same opinion. And the times were out of joint. As World War I decimated Europe, and Poland awaited the outcome of another manipulation of its destiny, Conrad had no cause for believing that his worst political fears would not be justified. British foreign policy in Eastern Europe, then as later, was to play Germany and Russia against each other and in this contest Poland was always the loser. Conrad disclaimed any probability of moral improvement in the new Russian state ("The tiger cannot change its stripes, nor the leopard its spots"). When, in 1919, Soviet Russia was invited to sit at the peace-conference table, Conrad's scorn knew no constraint. Najder quotes, at length, a letter he penned to Hugh Clifford, a highly placed official in His Majesty's government, a month before Great Britain's "official recognition" of an independent Poland.

> The only justification for the reestablishment of Poland is political necessity, but that has never very clearly been seen except by a superior mind here and there, both in France and England. Nothing serious or effective will be done. Poland will have to pay the price of some pretty ugly compromise . . . . The mangy Russian dog having gone mad is now being invited to sit at the Conference table, on British initiative! The thing is inconceivable, but there it is. One asks oneself whether this is idealism, stupidity or hypocrisy?

In the light of recent events, we may wonder if, in Poland, Conrad is undergoing a revival of interest. Only a Pole can tell us. I have learned that *Lord Jim* is required reading in high schools. Of Conrad's purely political relevance we can afford to be doubtful. The "solidarity with all mankind" of which he so often spoke was a far more abstract conception than the Solidarity invoked today in Poland; the probability is that his countrymen, while appreciating Conrad's sentiments, find his social conceptions insufficiently democratic. He was a patriot, not an equalitarian. His natural point of vantage was the bridge, not the forecastle.

Conrad died, after a heart attack, in August of 1924. He was buried in St. Thomas's church, in Canterbury, and his Roman Catholic funeral took place during the annual cricket festival. On his tombstone was inscribed a couplet from Edmund Spenser,

> Sleepe after toyle, port after stormie seas,
> Ease after warre, death after life does greatly please.

Neither Karl nor Najder fails to recognize that the lines in question were in the poem spoken by Despair, counseling suicide (which Karl finds fitting but Najder, not), nor do they overlook the fact that Conrad's Polish name on the tombstone was misspelled.

Perhaps, after all, the Spenserian epigraph should have been replaced by his uncle, Brobowski's, injunction, after their reunion and final meeting in Cracow: "Remember—wherever you may sail you are sailing towards Poland!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dostoevsky's carnival

Mikhail Bakhtin Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics. Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson. Introduction by Wayne C. Booth. University of Minnesota Press, 322 pages, $35

reviewed by René Wellek

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), a Russian scholar, has recently found translators, expounders, and admirers in the West. In the introduction to a collection of Bakhtin's posthumous essays, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, Texas, 1981), Michael Holquist proclaimed him "one of the leading thinkers of the twentieth century." Bakhtin was indeed an immensely erudite, perceptive, and acute literary scholar. His first book, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Work* (1929), was known in the Thirties and after to every student of Dostoevsky who could read Russian. Just after the publication of that book, Bakhtin was arrested and banished to a small town in northern Kazakhstan, where he was made to work as a bookkeeper. Even after he was allowed to return to central Russia and resume his studies, his dissertation on Rabelais was rejected. At last, in 1936, he was appointed to the faculty of a teacher's college (later made a university) in Saransk, in the remote Mordvinian Republic. Only after his retirement, in 1963, was a new, expanded, and revised edition of his first book, renamed *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* published. This was followed, in 1965, by a book on Rabelais. In 1975, the year of Bakhtin's death, a collection of early essays, some dating back to the Twenties, appeared as *Questions of Literature and Aesthetics.* Another miscellany of articles, *Aesthetics of Literary Creation,* came out in 1979.

Bakhtin's work was first noticed in France. Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian scholar living in France, wrote an article on him in 1967, and the Dostoevsky and Rabelais books appeared in French translations in 1970. An English translation of *Rabelais and His World* was published by the MIT Press in 1968 and in 1973 Ardis Publishers brought out *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* translated by R. W. Rotsel. Caryl Emerson's new translation improves greatly on the earlier one: it is fluent and accurate, though Emerson is given to using unlovely abstract nouns such as "unfinalizability," "dialogicality," and "addressivity," presumably in an attempt to reproduce Bakhtin's clumsy style.

Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics should appeal to every student of Dostoevsky, since it was one of the first Russian books to consider him "first and foremost an artist and not a philosopher or a publicist." Though Bakhtin claims Dostoevsky to be "one of the greatest innovators in the realm of artistic form," his study is not at all formalist, if we understand formalism to refer to the doctrines of the Russian formalist group. Indeed, Bakhtin sharply rejected those doctrines as "materialist," that is, as too preoccupied with the linguistic material of poetry. Neither is Bakhtin's study a Marxist book, which would see Dostoevsky as a chronicler of the evils of nineteenth-century Russia and as a propagandist for a reactionary politics and traditional religion. Rather, Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky's novels are "polyphonic"; they present us with a chorus of independent voices that are fully equal and do not serve the ideological position of the author.

Dostoevsky, no doubt, has the gift of entering the mind of his characters, of putting into their mouths ideas and feelings that might be totally alien or even repulsive to him personally. One can argue that he deliberately allows some of his most objectionable characters to expound his favorite ideas and, vice versa, his most sympathetic characters to voice the most perverse opinions. Bakhtin, however, pushes this insight to the extreme when he says that Dostoevsky "retains for himself, that is for his exclusive field of vision, not a single essential definition, not a single trait, not the smallest feature of the hero." Polyphony is, after all, merely a metaphor, first used, as far as I know, sometime before 1865 by Otto Lud-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wig, the German playwright, in his reflections on the novel. Applied to the novel, polyphony can only mean the same as "counterpoint," or "many voices," or "dramaticity." Dostoevsky's works, as the successful dramatizations of his novels by the Stanislavsky troupe show, are built around a series of scenes that often explode in angry quarrels or even in physical violence. He belonged to the strand of the modern novel that proclaimed the ideal of "objectivity," though he was—in contrast to Flaubert or Henry James—far from dogmatically committed to it. The long narrative expositions and comments of the "chronicler" testify to that. But this power of evoking the most contradictory feelings and ideas does not obscure Dostoevsky's definite and clearly articulated angle of vision.

Bakhtin's appeal to relativism, his comparison of Dostoevsky's world with the Einsteinian universe, is totally unwarranted. Dostoevsky's ample notebooks and drafts show on every page that he reflected at length on what to say and what to withhold from his characters and that he preserved full control over them. In a review of a play he expressly asserts that "it is too little to display all the given qualities of a character; rather one should resolutely illuminate it by one's own artistic point of view. An artist must not remain on the same level with the characters he depicts."

Bakhtin depicts the Dostoevsky hero as a disembodied consciousness or soul. He says that the hero is "a pure voice, we do not see him, we hear him." But this is an exaggeration if we think of the Adam's apple of Fyodor Karamazov, or the curves of Grushenka, or of Myshkin in the railroad carriage, or of many other occasions. Bakhtin is right in saying that Dostoevsky is less interested in the physical world and nature than many other novelists, but to say that in Dostoevsky "there is no objective representation of the environment, of everyday life, of nature, of objects" is again to go too far. We need only think of the images of Petersburg that emerge from his writings (and these images are not only in the minds of his dreamers or of Raskolnikov), or the house of Rogozhin, or of the pictures by Claude Lorrain, Holbein, Raphael, and others described by his narrators, sometimes in minute detail. Similarly, the statement that Dostoevsky's hero is a "man of the idea; not a character, not a temperament, not a social or psychological type" is refuted by many exceptions. We are told by Dostoevsky that the Underground Man "is one of the representatives of a generation still living." In *The Possessed,* Stefan Trofimovich Verkhovensky is characterized as an old-time sentimental liberal in contrast to his son Peter, the nihilist, a representative of the new generation. Both the Raw Youth and his father, Versilov, are presented as social types. Dostoevsky even held an elaborate theory of literary typology. Nor is it true that in the novels of Dostoevsky "there is no causality, no genesis, no explanations based on the past, on the influences of the environment or of upbringing." It is sufficient to point to the carefully worked out chronology of *The Possessed,* or to the accounts of the childhood of the Karamazov brothers, or to the early life of the Raw Youth to see that this is not always so. One need not be an adherent of a simpleminded concept of art as "reflection of reality" to see that Dostoevsky is deeply involved in his place and time, however far he transcended them as an artist of universal appeal, and that his novels were meant to serve very concrete purposes, such as the polemic against nihilism.

One could suspect Bakhtin of embracing this theory in order to make Dostoevsky more acceptable to the authorities in power. And indeed, Anatoli Lunacharsky, the Soviet Commissar of Education just before Bakhtin's book appeared, praised the first edition; he saw Dostoevsky's supposed "inability to take a definite ideological stand" as a symptom of an early stage of capitalism. Still, Bakhtin's view could not have been merely opportunistic. It is based on his commitment to the ideal of objectivity. "If the umbilical cord uniting the hero to his creator is not cut, then what we have is not a work of art but a personal document." And

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

yet Proust's great series, most lyrical poetry, and the novels of Sterne, Mann, or even Tolstoy do not cut the umbilical cord, and they cannot be condemned by this criterion. Nor can I see why drama is more controlled by the author and thus "especially monolithic," as Bakhtin states. Isn't Shakespeare at least as "polyphonic" as Dostoevsky? We still argue about Shakespeare's world view, while there cannot be any doubt about Dostoevsky's, at least in its outlines.

For Bakhtin, the genres are divided by insuperable barriers, and the novel in particular is in a privileged position. It is the only genre that uses what he calls the "double-voiced" word, a discourse that overtly or implicitly addresses "the other." One of Bakhtin's main assumptions is that in the novel in general, and in Dostoevsky's novels in particular, there is a dialogic relationship that may be contained even within a single utterance, inside an individual word. Dostoevsky's discourse thus refers not only to the referential object but to another's discourse, to someone else's speech. In chapters commenting on many works of Dostoevsky, particularly *The Double* and *Notes from the Underground,* Bakhtin shows that in Dostoevsky "almost no word is without its intense glance at somebody else's word." Some of his examples are passages that can be described as parody, stylization, or what is today called "intertextuality"; some are addresses to imaginary audiences, such as the Underground Man's irritated speech. All are sensitively analyzed by Bakhtin in order to argue that "the thinking human consciousness and the dialogic sphere in which this consciousness exists" cannot be reached through a monologic artistic approach. Bakhtin criticizes linguistic stylistics for being incapable of coping with the question of dialogue. He calls his method "metalinguistics," a misleading term since it implies a metaphysics of human community. Bakhtin alludes to Martin Buber's "I and thou"; he could also have appealed to Schopenhauer's "I am you." Bakhtin's participation in a religious group was apparently one of the reasons why he was persecuted.

Sam Francis

3 Decades / Paintings & Gouaches

July 14 — August 25, 1984

PAMELA
AUCHINCLOSS
GALLERY

1323 State Street, Santa Barbara, Ca. 93101 • (805) 966-6865

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In the 1963 edition of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* Bakhtin's claim for Dostoevsky's uniqueness is buttressed by an argument absent from the first edition. In studying Rabelais, Bakhtin discovered the rich world of medieval folk humor and the role of the carnival in medieval life. Their importance was the main theme of his book on Rabelais, which minimized Rabelais's humanism and scholasticism. The study of medieval popular forms sent Bakhtin back to antiquity, to the so-called "Menippean satire," the Socratic dialogue, and other genres outside the canon of the drama and heroic epic. Bakhtin calls this entire tradition—which embraces many miscellaneous forms—"menippea" and he emphasizes the impact of "carnivalization," one of its aspects, on the development of the novel. (This genre concept is very similar to what Northrop Frye calls "Anatomy," one of his four basic genres of literature.) Bakhtin traces this tradition through its decay in the Enlightenment and claims that Dostoevsky belongs to it. He analyzes two short sketches: *Bobok* (1873), a macabre dialogue of the dead, and *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* (1877), a Utopian vision. He claims them to be "menippeas." Indeed, "all Dostoevsky's work has elements of menippea: the Socratic dialogue, the diatribe, the soliloquy, the confession." Raskolnikov's first visit to Sonya is "an almost perfect christianized menippea." The dream of Svidrigailov before his suicide, Ippolit's confession, Stavrogin's visit to Tikhon—all are menippeas. The famous conversation between Ivan and Alyosha in the tavern and "the Legend of the Great Inquisitor" are "remarkable menippeas." The term becomes so all-inclusive that it allows Bakhtin to describe almost every prominent novelist as "carnivalesque": Cervantes, Rabelais, Voltaire, Diderot, Sterne, Goethe, E. T. A. Hoffmann—finally, even Balzac, George Sand, and Victor Hugo. And of course Bakhtin finds the carnivalesque all over Dostoevsky: in every scandal scene and in every mass scene, such as the feast in *The Possessed* or the orgy of Dmitri Karamazov in Mokroe before his arrest.

But "carnivalesque" is not a correct characterization of Dostoevsky's general tone and attitude, even though we may grant it might fit some scenes in his novels. Bakhtin says that "carnival is a way of sensing the world as one great communal performance," as "joyful relativity," but nowhere in Dostoevsky can be found a depiction of collective rapture. There is nothing in Dostoevsky of Rabelais's corporality, of the lust for life of the Roman *saturnalia,* or the comic exuberance of the Italian *Commedia dell'arte.* Dostoevsky represents rather the opposite of the carnival spirit. He was a man of deep commitments, of profound seriousness, spirituality, and strict ethics, whatever the lapses in his own life.

Bakhtin is oddly enough committed to an almost Platonic conception of the nature of genre. He assumes that there is such an entity as "menippea" and the "carnivalesque" that enters into all kinds of relationships, transforms itself, and combines with other genres but nevertheless preserves its identity throughout history. He speaks of the "essence" of a genre, of Dostoevsky working through "the objective memory of the genre" (whatever that may be); he says that "the menippea has a remarkable capacity to absorb into itself kindred small genres and to penetrate as a component element into other larger genres" and that it "absorbed the diatribe, the soliloquy and the symposium." We must conclude that Bakhtin has again overstated his case.

The polyphony of Dostoevsky's novels is not unique and is misinterpreted if it denies a definite angle of vision to Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky does not belong to the carnivalesque tradition, though there are some occasional similarities. His novels cannot be taken out of the tradition of the European adventure novel (which was rightly emphasized in the first edition of Bakhtin's book), out of the proximity of Gogol, Dickens, Balzac, and the French sensationalist novelists such as Eugène Sue. Dostoevsky is a great artist, and Bakhtin describes and analyzes some of his specific traits, but "polyphony," in his sense of extreme neutrality and relativ-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ity, and "carnivalesque" are not among them.

This new translation is introduced by Wayne C. Booth, the author of *The Rhetoric of Fiction,* in which he argued persuasively against the dogma of objectivity as it was propounded and practiced by Flaubert and Henry James. He defended the frankly subjective novels of Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, and Jane Austen, who comment freely on characters and situations. Mr. Booth professes to be converted to a new objectivity by Bakhtin's book. This conversion seems to me quite unnecessary, since Dostoevsky remains a novelist with a single vision, a definite point of view that cannot be mistaken. That point of view has been expounded by Dimitri Merezhkovsky, Nikolay Berdayev, Konstantin Mochulsky, André Gide, Reinhart Lauth, Vyacheslav Ivanov, and others with only minor disagreements. Bakhtin is right, however, to warn against the danger of reducing Dostoevsky to an ideologist, a propagandist of an abstract creed. If Dostoevsky had expounded his views in treatises, he would appear only as an episodic figure in the history of Russian thought and would be known only to specialists in the West. He created, instead, a world of imagination with a deep insight into human conduct and the perennial condition of man, a world peopled by human beings who are, as Bakhtin argues, speaking to each other and to us intimately and persuasively, speaking of things Dostoevsky cared about and believed in passionately, personally.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Letters

Name-calling

To the Editors:

It was called to my attention recently that Hilton Kramer in "The MLA Centennial Follies," had attributed a remark to me that I found, when I looked it up on page four of the February issue of *The New Criterion,* did not represent at all accurately what I had said in my talk at the Modern Language Association. As one can see from the typescript of the talk I gave, I made a generalization about every person who was once a young Turk becoming, by the simple process of time, an old fogey. The sentence in question reads, after the sentiment from Yeats that things thought too long can no longer be thought, "No generation can do what its teachers did; and young Turks, without changing by an inch or an ounce, become old fogeys by the simple fact of staying alive." You will I hope agree that a generalization is a generalization. No one at the meeting "sat and listened to Professor Vendler describe Professor Wellek as 'an old fogey.'" (I adapt Mr. Kramer's sentence without distorting it.) It is true that earlier in the talk I remarked that "both Walter Jackson Bate and René Wellek have attacked deconstructionists, just as . . . [Douglas] Bush and . . . [Frederick] Crews" attacked other schools (in the case of Bush, the archetypalists, in the case of Crews, all schools). Nowhere did I suggest that Bate, Wellek, Bush, and Crews were "silly, if not indeed senile" (what Mr. Kramer proffered as my "view"). I simply suggested that all new schools (whether archetypalists, Freudians, deconstructionists, etc.) come in for criticism of the sort Bush and Crews and Bate and Wellek have offered. I also suggested that no school of thought can last forever, no critical method be sufficient for all needs, that each one passes into the realm of received ideas, by which all young Turks become, in the nature of things, old fogeys.

Name-calling is something else altogether. I would never, I hope, describe any of the learned men grouped above by any pejorative name. I am very much distressed that Mr. Kramer should represent me as having done so, and I hope that he will in some public way represent himself as mistaken. Name-calling is not the same as a generalization a page later, applied to all of us. Personal name-calling is abhorrent. Equally abhorrent to me is reading in print that I have a "view" which I do not hold, that it was "silly, if not indeed senile" to write articles such as Bate's Crews's, Bush's, or Wellek's. Indeed, since I say that every literary movement attracts brilliant minds, I mean to include just those brilliant minds—Wellek's among them—in my praise. To say that "beauty dies of beauty, worth of worth," does not deny, but rather affirms, the beauty and worth of past generations, while still saying that the style of poetry that did for the nineteenth century cannot be written now, and the style of thought that did for the first half of this century is bound to be replaced by "new styles of architecture, a change of heart."

The only way that I can think of to account for Mr. Kramer's misrepresentation of my words and sentiments is to assume he made hasty notes and had not seen my typescript. I cannot believe that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

if he had seen the typescript he would have engaged in such misrepresentation. My own distress is as naught compared to the distress I fear such an article will cause Professor Wellek, a man I revere as I revere Frye, Bush, and others who were potent in my own critical formation. You might know that nobody now subscribes to I. A. Richards's theory of communication in poetry as he formulated it; that does not, for me, invalidate the dedication of my second book to Richards. By taking an axiom about the necessary desuetude of all the many forms, tentative forms, into which consciousness expands itself as a remark about the personal mentality of a particular man, Mr. Kramer made me out to be a despicable colleague.

I am not satisfied by the simple writing of this letter. I ask that *The New Criterion* publish the first four paragraphs of my speech, together with this letter, so that readers can draw their own conclusions as to my intent and my "view," as Mr. Kramer calls it:

> Perhaps the only true thing to say about the study and teaching of literature is that it is impossible. But instead, let me begin with three illustrative anecdotes. According to the memorial minute just published for Douglas Bush, this mild-mannered man, when he had passed his doctoral orals, burned, in sheer hatred, his texts of Old Norse, Old English, Old High German, and whatever else he had suffered in the philological requirements. For him, the philological method was dead; but the history of ideas seemed alive. Yet, later on, as a section person, I heard a professor, a product of Harvard, teach *The Faerie Queene*, that tangle of love-pursuits and stylized duels, under the rubrics, solemnly written on the blackboard, of "Neo-Platonism," "Christian Humanism," and "Syncretism." Duessa, the false Florimel, and Busirane faded into a lifeless history of ideas. And just the other day, I picked up the literature text used in a Cambridge private school; the first prose item, entitled "The Golden Age," was ascribed to a female author I will call Jane Doe. But Jane Doe's essay sounded all too familiar; and on the permissions page, in tiny type, the passage was correctly ascribed to Ovid. However, no child using the book would know that the passage was written by Ovid, or was a piece of Roman literature, or that it was written in verse in the original.
>
> The moral of these anecdotes is that no matter what we do, or what we have done, it is wrong. The prophecy that should follow is that whatever we do in the future will be wrong too. And already both Walter Jackson Bate and René Wellek have attacked deconstructionists, just as Douglas Bush (but in a far wittier way) once attacked archetypal criticism in his parody "Mrs. Bennett and the Dark Gods," and as Fred Crews exposed the vanity of all critical schools in "The Pooh Perplex." It remains true, too, as the newspapers are fond of saying, that the yearly program issue of PMLA is its own best parody.
>
> About changes in critical fashion I can only echo Yeats's true remark: "Things thought too long can be no longer thought,/For beauty dies of beauty, worth of worth." The rather more dramatic model of Bate and Wellek, on the analogy of Gresham's Law, where bad criticism drives out good, seems to me not so true as Yeats's insight, in which each form of thought, and each form of criticism, and each form of the aesthetic, is an impulse which exhausts itself eventually. No generation can do what its teachers did; and young Turks, without changing by an inch or an ounce, become old fogeys by the simple fact of staying alive. This is reassuring, if also tragicomical. Of every literary movement, it can be said, in Wallace Stevens' words, "It is a sound like any other; it will end." It is also true of every critical movement that while it lasts it engages brilliant minds, mediocre minds, and ignoble minds; no movement should be judged on its third-rate products. I will return to the present scene before I close, but for a moment, now, I should like to look at what survives of our legacy from the past hundred years of literary study and teaching; I think that is a help to understanding the present.
>
> Not much is left, in the American undergraduate curriculum, of the original philological and etymological base of literary study, an inheritance from the giddy years in which the discovery of the original roots of language lurked in every corner. That European passion for comparative linguistics and its veneration for the historical origins of language (in which Eliot participated in studying Sanskrit), has disappeared, and linguistics has become a separate science. Our undergraduates, many of them, have never read Chaucer in the original; of course they know neither Latin nor Greek; they tend to think that Shakespeare's plays are written in, as they say, "old English." Because they have read in high school

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

almost nothing written before 1800, and fairly little not written in America, they find the traditional survey—introducing them in sequence to the poetry of Shakespeare, Sidney, Spenser, the Metaphysical poets and Milton, nearly unmanageable, simply in terms of linguistic competence.

Helen Vendler
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Hilton Kramer replies:

One can indeed agree that, as Helen Vendler says, "a generalization is a generalization." But generalizations, if they are intended to be anything more than meaningless rhetorical curlicues, are derived from particular cases. And among the particular cases cited by Professor Vendler in her talk—not once, but twice—as the basis for declaring that "young Turks, without changing by an inch or an ounce, become old fogeys by the simple fact of staying alive," was that of Professor René Wellek. On this point, there can be no question. The text of Professor Vendler's speech—in the excerpts printed above—confirms the accuracy of our report on its delivery to the MLA convention. That Professor Vendler may in retrospect have come to regret her statement about "old fogeys," now that its implications have been brought to her attention, is another matter altogether.

"I would never, I hope, describe any of [these] learned men . . . by any pejorative name," Professor Vendler insists. But surely her use of the term "old fogeys" *was* pejorative in its specific application on that occasion. It was certainly not employed as a term of commendation. Now it may be that under the new deconstructionist dispensation which Professor Vendler was so eager to defend in her talk, words like "old fogey"—or even, for that matter, "pejorative"—have been assigned special meanings unknown to the rest of us. But the older, established meaning of "old fogey" remains what it has always been: "a disrespectful appellation [according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*] for a man advanced in life; *esp.* one with antiquated notions, an old-fashioned fellow, one 'behind the times.'" It was in fact this very question of what, in the study and teaching of literature, could now be said to be "behind the times," and thus of no further use or interest and what was to be advanced as an up-to-date alternative, that Professor Vendler was concerned to illuminate in her talk to the MLA. And what was really remarkable in her point of view on this question was the equanimity with which she embraced sheer modishness as the only viable principle left to those who make the study and the teaching of literature their professional responsibility.

It was in this respect that Professor Vendler's consignment of so many distinguished literary scholars—Professor Wellek among them—to the realm of fogeydom was essential to her purpose. For where fashion is upheld as the only surviving standard, all traces of a more rigorous alternative must indeed be dismissed as "antiquated notions." One would have a lot more sympathy for Professor Vendler's "distress" if it had something to do with her awareness of the intellectual debacle which her paper so vividly—yet so unwittingly—described. But alas, her distress in this case is obviously derived from something else—her embarrassment at being seen to uphold a position which even she now recognizes as indefensible.

Geoffrey Hill

To the Editors:

Readers of Robert Richman's article on Geoffrey Hill in the April issue of *The New Criterion* ("'The Battle It Was Born to Lose': The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill") will be interested to know that Oxford University Press will be publishing this fall both Mr. Hill's book-length poem *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* and a collection of Mr. Hill's essays and lectures, to be called *The Lords of Limit*.

Curtis Church
Associate Editor
Oxford University Press
New York City

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

AN EXHIBITION OF WORKS BASED ON THE ARTIST'S STUDIO

THE STUDIO

BEAL: "ANNE WILFER DRAWING", 1982-83, OIL ON CANVAS 54 x 50 INCHES

JUNE — JULY

AZACETA, BEAL, BROWN, DUGAN, LANCELEY,
McGARRELL, PEARLSTEIN, VALERIO, WILEY AND OTHERS

ALLAN FRUMKIN GALLERY 50 WEST 57TH STREET NEW YORK

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ALL THE ANGLES ON ALL THE ARTS

Cézanne and the End of Impressionism

A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art

Richard Shiff

Cézanne's works have been subject to a wide array of formalistic and psychological interpretations. Here Shiff rebuilds the interpretation of Cézanne's painting upon a broad foundation in the history of 19th-century French art. "Shiff's book is one of those rare texts that restores the proper relationships among printed words and painted images, and it is going to rank among the major interpretive works of contemporary art history." —Robert Herbert, Yale University

Cloth $29.95 (est.) 328 pages
1 color, 57 b&w illustrations

Pines and Rocks (Fontainebleau?) (1896-99) Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Lillie P. Bliss Collection.

The Omega Workshops

Judith Collins

With a Foreword by **Quentin Bell**

This book recounts for the first time the full story of the Bloomsbury Group's venture into interior decoration. Founded in 1913 by British painter and critic Roger Fry and codirected by painters Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, the workshops brought together art and industry to create murals, furniture, pottery, textiles, and clothing.

Cloth $25.00 304 pages 6 color, 92 b&w illustrations

Now available in paperback

The Art of Describing

Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century

Svetlana Alpers

"There is no doubt that thanks to [Alpers'] highly original book the study of the Dutch masters of the seventeenth century will be thoroughly reformed and rejuvenated." —E. H. Gombrich, *The New York Review of Books*

Paper $17.50 302 pages
4 color plates, 177 b&w illustrations

John Soane

The Making of an Architect

Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey

"Du Prey's illumination of Soane's early years . . . shows with sympathy and in detail the genesis of that majestic, austere, and curious quality in Soane's later works that continues to thrill even casual students of architecture." —Andres Rabeneck, *Design Book Review*

$19.95 425 pages
8 color, 253 b&w photographs

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

5801 South Ellis Avenue Chicago, IL 60637

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fairfield Porter

Whitney Museum of American Art
June 1–August 19

Exclusively Represented by

HIRSCHL & ADLER Modern

851 Madison Avenue New York, New York 10021 212 744-6700

Richard Ryan

Recent Paintings

June 19–July 13, 1984

Summer Hours: Monday through Friday 10–5

Robert Schoelkopf Gallery
50 West 57 Street New York 10019 (212) 765-3540

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Alice Dalton Brown

New Paintings
June 1-27

Corner with Flag, 1984. Oil on canvas, 54 x 60 inches.

AM SACHS *29 West 57 Street NY 10019 Tel: 421-8686*

INVITATIONAL EXHIBITION

May 25-June 22, 1984

Rudie Berkhout
Sue Coe
Peter Drake
Barbara Kruger
John Monti
Scott Richter
Michael Zwack

GRACE BORGENICHT GALLERY
724 Fifth Avenue, New York 10019 212/247-2111

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INFLUENTIAL NEW WORKS FROM HARPER & ROW

SPRING 1984

Germaine Greer — **SEX & DESTINY**
The Politics of Human Fertility

Saul Friedländer — **REFLECTIONS OF NAZISM**
An Essay on Kitsch and Death

Freeman Dyson — **WEAPONS AND HOPE**

S. E. Luria — **A SLOT MACHINE, A BROKEN TEST TUBE**
An Autobiography

Alan Bullock & R. B. Woodings, eds. — **20th-CENTURY CULTURE**
A Biographical Companion
available in May

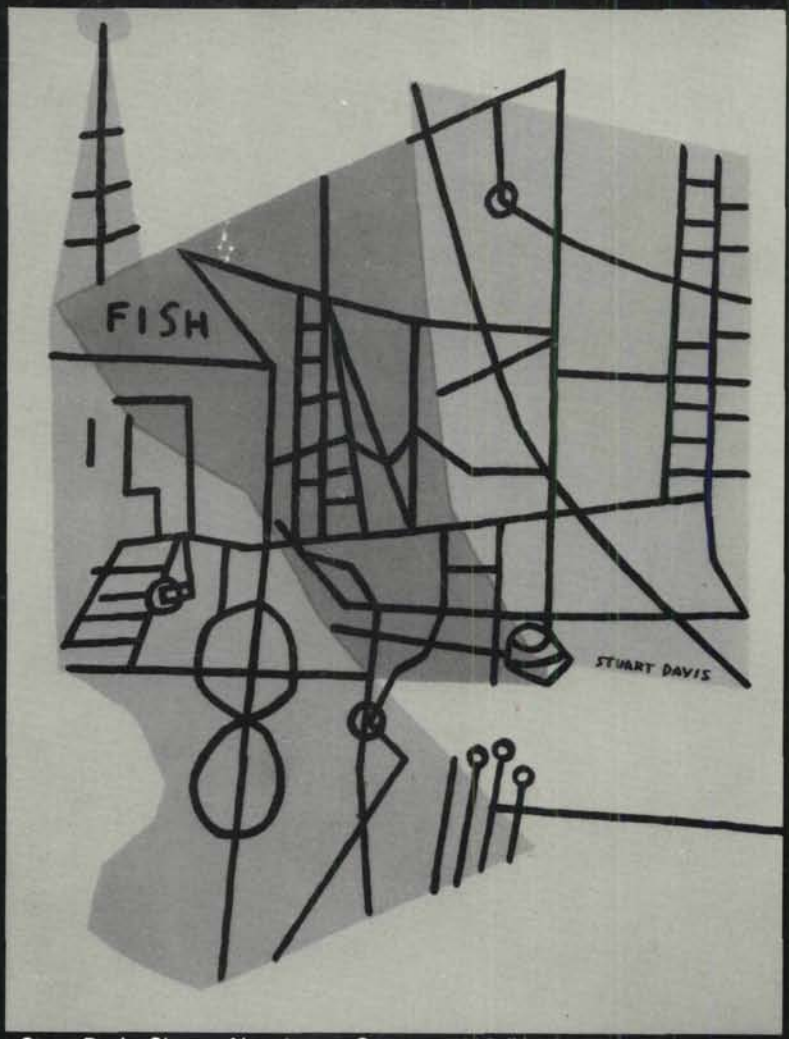
At your bookseller, or call toll free (800) 638-3030

HARPER & ROW

10 East 53d Street • New York, NY 10022

991

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Stuart Davis, *Shape of Landscape Space*, c. 1939, lithograph, 12¾ x 10 inches

AMERICAN ABSTRACT ART, c. 1930-40

WASHBURN GALLERY 42 EAST 57 NEW YORK JUNE 21 – JULY 2

The New Criterion
850 Seventh Avenue
Suite 503
New York NY 10019

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED